Public Participation in Geodesign –
A Prognosis for the Future

Carl STEINITZ

Keynote: 2 June 2012

1 Introduction

Landscape planning, in common with all physical design activities, requires answers to six questions:
1. How should the landscape context be described in content, space and time?
2. How does the landscape context function?
3. Is the current context working well?
4. How might the landscape context be changed in the future?
5. What difference might the changes cause?
6. How should the landscape context be changed?

There is a commonly held expectation that the answers to these questions and their coordination into a landscape plan for an area will be undertaken by a team of professionally and scientifically trained persons, guided by a client committee which is frequently a branch of government. My talk will show examples of how each of these questions has been answered directly through public participation. It will raise an awkward question: what will the future professional roles be when today's developing technologies are ubiquitous and enable direct public participation in all aspects of planning and design?

Professional practice and education are changing rapidly and this tendency will continue due largely to changes in political attitudes and in information technologies. For example, consider the implications of what is happening in Europe with regards to landscape planning, something which may become a worldwide model. The European Landscape Convention of the Council of Europe offers a very useful model. In Florence in October 2000, the 47 member countries of The Council of Europe adopted The European Landscape Convention. The Action Plan of the European Landscape Convention was adopted by the Heads of States and Governments of the member states in Warsaw, on May 17, 2005. This treaty has been ratified and is law in most but not all of the member states. As an international treaty, it supersedes national law in its field.

2 The Principal Provisions of the European Landscape Convention’s Action Plan Are in Article 5

In Article 5 General Measures, each Party undertakes to
a. recognize landscapes in law as an essential component of people’s surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity;
b. establish and implement landscape policies aimed at landscape protection, management and planning through the adoption of the specific measures set out in Article 6;

c. establish procedures for the participation of the general public, local and regional authorities, and other parties with an interest in the definition and implementation of the landscape policies mentioned in paragraph b above (italics mine);

d. integrate landscape into its regional land town planning policies and in its cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies, as well as in any other policies with possible direct or indirect impact on landscape.

Because The European Landscape Convention codifies the need for stakeholder input into the beginning of defining any future policy or design the design team is then required to organize its work to produce such materials for public review and decision making. The people of the place are not just considered as clients, but are active members of the design team. I believe that this will ultimately and substantially transform professional practice, and it will force us to rethink some of our educational processes.

I have recently completed writing a book, “A Framework for Geodesign”, to be published by Esri Press in July. In it, I have argued throughout that design at larger sizes of designing for landscape change – geodesign – is necessarily a collaborative enterprise.

Fig. 1: The basis and need for collaboration, and the emphases as a function of size and scale

This is different from the individualistic assumptions underpinning the majority (but not all) of education in the design professions. The model of practice for traditional design practice is that there is a client (at the head of the table) and a single designer (albeit often supported by “staff”) who will help make the design (Fig. 2).
Fig. 2: The client and the designer

Fig. 3: The people of the place and the geodesign team
Recognizing the collaborative nature required to deal with the obvious complexities of geodesign contributed to this framework being structured as it is, as I have described it in detail in the book and in previous DLA Conferences. The stakeholder group has its necessary roles in input and decision making, while the technical team of designers and scientists and information technologists has the responsibility of carrying out the study (Fig. 3).

The European Landscape Convention broadens the responsibility of the people of the place and stakeholders and legitimizes their direct and deeper involvement with the design team. In the case studies presented in my book, there is at least one example of direct stakeholder involvement in each of the six fundamental questions of the framework. I will summarize and illustrate them in my talk.

The question must be asked, "Why shouldn't the people of the place take over the whole process of geodesign?" After all, it's their place and among them they surely know more than the other members of the geodesign team. Why, as shown in Fig. 4, shouldn't they take total responsibility for changing their own geography, and as they see fit?

There are several obvious reasons why this is not likely to happen completely. The stakeholders may be in serious disagreement about what should be done. They may not have any of the relevant experiences, or any interest beyond their own (if that), or the time and energy to devote to what is frequently a long and difficult set of integrated tasks. Especially in a large region, self-guided geodesign would undoubtedly be a very inefficient and unwieldy process. Both the professional literature and the cases I know show direct involvement in the parts, but not in the whole linked process of geodesign.

Fig. 4: Complete and direct involvement by the people of the place
However, I have no doubt that the next generation of people in geodesign will see increasing public participation in all aspects, including direct management of the process by the people of the place. I expect a reversal of an important social relationship. Typically, the geodesign team of design professionals, scientists, and information technology specialists work as a team separately from the people of the place. While we meet regularly with stakeholder representatives and communicate on a question-by-question basis during the course of conducting the study, ultimately the process is not a wholly democratic and entirely participatory one. I expect future geodesign studies to involve much more frequent and real-time participation and communication. The extent of that direct participation will vary, principally as a function of size and scale. Smaller projects and simpler methods enable more direct participation (Fig. 5), while larger studies with more complex methods require more significant roles by the design professionals and scientists (Fig. 6). The roles of the “conductor” will become even more central to geodesign, as will the needs for wider and more efficient communication. The balance of activity among design professionals and geographic scientists in applying the framework for geodesign will shift as a function of study area size and scale. The collaborative activities will also see shifting influences among the four essential participating groups as a function of where they are in the framework (Fig. 7). However, one thing should not change, and that is the responsibility of the people of the place to make the final decision to change their geography.

Fig. 5: The people of the place will have a greater role in smaller geodesign studies, whose geographic scale and scope of the project is more limited and manageable. Projects of smaller size and scale may also require less technical expertise, something that is more likely to absent among the people of the place. “Conductors” are indicated with the letter C on their shirts and will be needed both on the geodesign team and also from among the stakeholders.
Fig. 6: In the future, larger scale geodesign projects will also have greater involvement from the people of the place, but there will be a need for more technically competent people and they will have to take a more active role.

Fig. 7: Roles in collaboration for geodesign will vary as a function of project size and scale.
When we consider the research our more advanced students are conducting, and today’s technology-driven development, we can see an emerging pattern for geodesign that will develop rapidly in this century. We will be living in a world where major geodesign decisions will be made simultaneously and interactively at several sizes and scales. We will be managing the process (as best we can). Or, in worst case scenarios, we all will be managed by some combination of uninformed decisions and anarchy. There is every likelihood that the students we are teaching today will be practicing in a world where they will have an overload of data and methodological options, and where they will have to choose even much more wisely than we do today. Professional practice – and education – will become much more complicated, but if we can understand and accept that complexity, we are also likely to become much more effective.