

Activities beyond design

Social events play a fundamental role in fostering collaborative experiences in urban planning and design. These gatherings are not merely supplementary activities but are integral to the overall process of building trust among the participants. Trust is crucial in collaborative environments, as it encourages open dialogue, reduces power imbalances and nurtures a sense of shared ownership over the outcomes (Innes and Booher 2004). By providing informal and welcoming spaces for interaction, social events create opportunities for participants to connect on a personal level by breaking down existing barriers due to differences in backgrounds, expertise or social status. This atmosphere of trust can lay the groundwork for meaningful participation, enabling participants to feel valued and heard throughout the design process.

In addition to trust-building, social events offer a space for dialogue that extends beyond the specific tasks and agendas of formal planning meetings. According to Sandercock (2003), these informal gatherings can facilitate the exchange of knowledge that might not emerge in more structured settings, allowing participants to share insights, experiences and concerns that are essential for understanding the complexities of urban spaces. By fostering informal conversations, social events can reveal hidden dynamics and local knowledge that might otherwise be overlooked. This broader, more holistic understanding can then inform the design phase, helping to create solutions that are aligned with the lived realities of the community.

When planning social events within collaborative design processes, it is essential to consider their timing, format and intended purpose. Events should occur at stages where the participants feel comfortable sharing their insights and when the information gathered can still influence design decisions. For example, holding social events early in the process can help set the tone for collaboration, and follow-up gatherings can be used to reflect on progress, gather feedback and adjust strategies as needed. The format of these events

should also be carefully curated to encourage active participation. Using creative methods such as workshops, storytelling sessions or even community festivals can make these events more engaging and accessible. This approach aligns with (Miraftab 2004) emphasis on insurgent planning practices that challenge conventional methods and create space for marginalised voices to be heard.

Social events can be seen as potential outcomes, not just as part of the design process. Key aspects of collaborative design include its flexibility and openness to diverse outcomes, depending on the needs and goals of the participants. The collaborative design of a community event – such as a workshop, exhibition or public gathering – can be just as powerful and transformative as a physical object. In this case, the event is the outcome where connections are fostered, knowledge is exchanged and participants are enabled to explore ideas collectively. An event can create a space for dialogue, challenge existing norms or spark new collaborations and ideas, thus achieving its intended purpose of transformation, learning and engagement without ever taking a physical form. These types of outcomes can have a lasting impact on the community, even if they are not tangible in the traditional sense.

Social events in collaborative planning are ultimately not only about gathering data but also about cultivating a sense of community and shared purpose. They provide the space to build relationships, reflect on shared experiences and co-create visions for the future. By integrating social events thoughtfully into collaborative design processes, planners can tap into the rich, diverse knowledge that communities hold, leading to more resilient and inclusive urban spaces. Embracing informal and socially oriented methods can significantly enhance the participatory design process, ensuring that it remains flexible, adaptive and genuinely inclusive.

Figure 19: Winter School Building Resilient Cities, Cairo, 2024. Source: Juliana Canedo



