INTERACTIVE PLANNING MANUAL

JAMES ROJAS

BACKGROUND:
INTERACTIVE PLANNING MANUAL

People's everyday planning experiences drive the interactive planning process. Everyone is an urban planner because we all live in the city and have ideas to improve it. My method draws people's ideas by taping into their emotions by making planning visual, tactile, and playful.

This method simplifies the planning process into accessible tasks that everyone can do. Barriers between people are removed because everyone creates and builds in a safe space where there are no right or wrong answers.

Language, age, income, education, planning knowledge does not matter because the median creates an equal playing field between all participants. In fact the more diverse the participants the more interesting is the process.

The interactive planning method is based on the pedagogical idea of project-based learning, where people retain more information by engaging all their senses.

I compare Interactive Planning to eating food because it engages many of the senses. People see, smell, touch, and taste food. When people participate in interactive planning they, see, touch, create, talk and listen.

There is a big difference between discussing food than the act of eating food. The same holds true with the city, there is a big different between discussing urban issues than experiencing it.

For people the city is visual, and sensual experience. It's dry, rainy, hot, cold, safe, unsafe, vibrant, boring for people, so this is how we need to discuss urban issues when relating it to planning, rather than in abstract language.

The act of eating together bonds family, friends, and sometimes strangers. The same is true when people come together to perform interactive activities.

I attempt to capture the urban experience through my methods of engagement. This is achieved through two methods:

METHODS:
INTERACTIVE WORKSHOPS

The one-hour community interactive workshops allow participants to self-reflect by investigating the environment. Participants interact with a medley of recycled, vibrant materials. Using their hands and minds to create and re-imagine their idea of an ideal city, street, public space, or building. Participants are given the task to design their ideal place in twenty minutes based on their personal knowledge, experiences, and needs. Twenty minutes is a good time because it allows people to think on their feet and not become wetted to their ideas. For architects, engineers, urban planners, and environmentalist twenty minutes may be too long of duration.

These participants may complete the exercise in ten to fifteen minutes. For the general public and children twenty minutes works well.

Step 1:

Participants are given materials, a blank piece of paper, and a rough criterion to help them think trough the process. How do they use the space? What does the space feel? What should the space look like? Participants have no constraints to maximize their creativity.

Step 2:

There is no scale, maps, pictures, no terms to learn, and no wrong or right answers; the only requirement is that everybody creates a three dimensional model.

Step 3:

After the twenty minutes are up the participants have one minute to explain their idea through the model to the group. As a facilitator, I ask people to state their name and tell us about their idea/plan. One minute keeps up the pace of the exercise. To some people like immigrants or children one minute is long and they may need help explaining their models. For environmentalist or urban planners, one minute is short and may have to be cut off.   --->

As each person explains their idea, someone should document it with note taking and pictures.

Since people interject their own personal experiences, memories, and random thoughts of place, both real and imagined, the explanation becomes the most interesting part of the process. As it allows for everyone to publicly bond, and engage in the process. An understanding or recognition of familiarity is shared among the group.

Once a person has completed their one-minute presentation, I quickly synthesize the information and repeat it back to the larger audience. Once that is complete, we want to celebrate the exercise and the fascinating explanations shared among the group through applause.

Step 4:

After participants have completed their individual task, they are asked to work together and create a group model synthesizing all their explanations into one great idea. During this phase of the exercise, the participants tend to combine models, only to realize that they must compromise, altering their ideals for the greater good of the community. The time for this is typically 15 minutes followed by a one-minute explanation where the various groups of participants share their grand idea with one another.

Reflection:

This creative exercise lets the participants see the city as a blank canvas letting them build their image of the city. The thousands of small colorful, vibrant, tactile, objects triggers the participant's emotional connections to the built environment. Participants connect and synthesize how they experience urban space by seeking and touching these objects.   --->

By using non-descript objects, participants are forced to be creative. Green yarn becomes grass, blue poker chips become the ocean, and hair rollers become apartments or office buildings.

This exercise lets participants investigate, discover, and explore their relationship with the built environment by arranging non-descript objects. The creations represented by these objects create small vignettes of urban life. Participants gain satisfaction from this process because they are able to translate memories, visions, and ideas from their mind into a physical form. As soon as participants realize this connection, they often times have an epiphany and recognize they created their ideal space.

... (reflections)

The array of approaches participants used to solve the design challenge is fascinating. Each participant solves the task in his or her own terms. Some designs are ideal based; "I think every office building should have a grammar school attached to it." Some designs are conceptual; "These aerial bike ways are going to improve transportation while preserving the environment." Some are designs that are specific and literal; "I added a swing set to create a child friendly Mariachi Plaza." Some designs capture an experience; "Jefferson Street is to noisy, so I added trees to tone down the noise." Some designs illustrate a solution to a problem; "This water management system that will solve LA water problems in the future." Still other solutions are derived from the materials; "All these buttons are happy people living in the city." All these solutions are valid and provide a rich venue to solve planning problems.

Conclusion:

The first step is to analyze and synthesis all the data is to group into categories depending on the mission of the workshop. What are long term or shorter solutions? What are solutions and what are experiences? What are people really telling us? For example, one person created a kite system to move around the city. What this is telling us, is says in this person wants a creative, experiential transportation system that does not harm the environment.

METHODS:
INTERACTIVE MODELS

The on-site interactive city is a modeled community that is designed to provoke interaction from the public. These large dioramas are designed to be read like a map and recreate the city's topography, urban form, major streets, and landmarks. Streets are labeled as well as other landmarks allowing the view quick access to the model. By adding some urban design interventions quickly establishes this as an interaction piece for creative thinking rather than a replica of the city. These interventions help clarify the city for the participants and allow planners to gauge their response.

People are typically attracted to the interactive model by its size and collection of small, vibrant building placed on it. However, once confronted by the model the viewer becomes the participant. They begin to observe the miniature vibrant landscape but more importantly, the participants begin to understand and read the model as a map. The richness that stems from interactive planning with the interactive model comes when the participant orients themselves on the model with the help of street names, landmarks, and geographical features such as the hills and the river.

Some participants are fascinated by the design and construction of the small buildings. They examine the design of buildings, they touch and feel the grooves of the buildings they like, or they study the overall composition of the buildings and how they form streets and skylines.

Once people understand and personalize the model, they begin to interact with it and rearrange the pieces on the model in ways that reflect their ideas. From this point, the participant understands the models as it becomes more personal and allows them to project themselves onto the model. They ask the questions like, "Where are we located on this map?" "Where do I live?" "Where do I work?
 "We need more open space near my house." "I would like to live by the river or on a hill." "I think these building look good together." "I will build the tallest building."
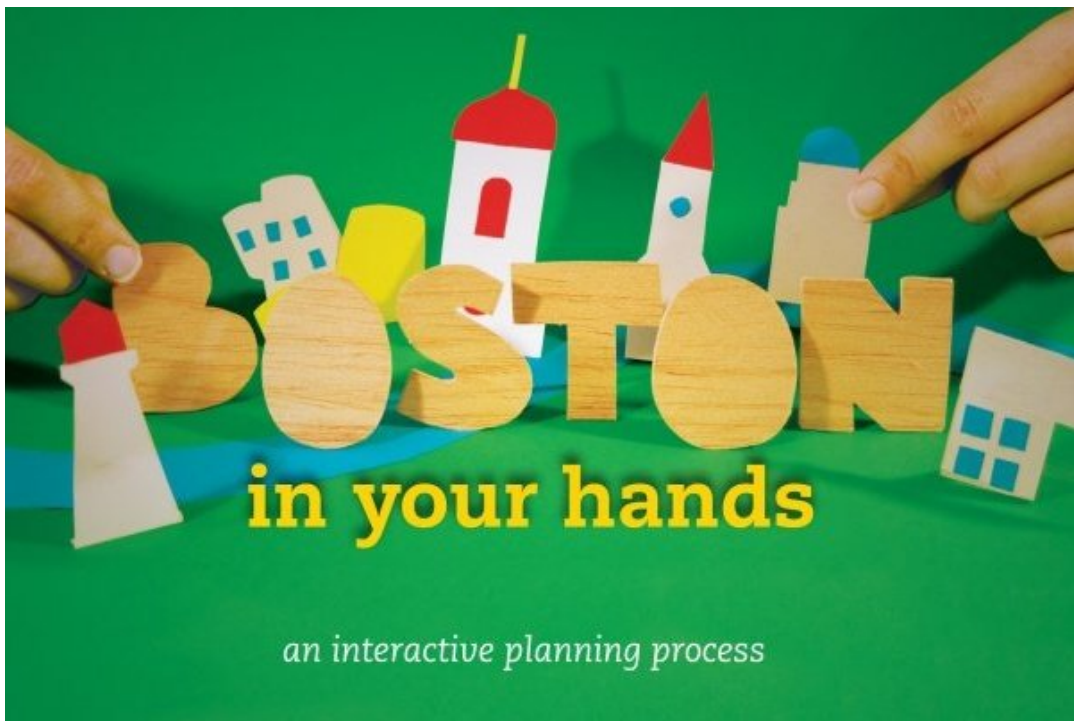
PLANNING FOR ALL

In the past three years I have facilitated over ninety workshops, have created over thirty interactive models, and have installed them in various cities across the globe. The interactive models and workshops make urban planning accessible to the public. The process brings the urban planning experience to the public in an unconventional way by re-enacting everyday public spaces like, parks, sidewalks, streets, art galleries, and train stations. These spaces become impromptu public urban forums where everyone including children and non-native English speakers can participate. Over thousands of people have participated in these interactive activities.

Due to the simplicity of the workshop, both through its set up and processes, I have facilitated workshops for a variety of venues ranging from educational, cultural, municipal, and community groups. For the universities, high schools, and grammars schools interactive planning becomes part of curriculum to teach students how to understand the built environment and the core principles of planning. For museums and art galleries, interactive planning pushes the boundaries of art letting the viewer become the artist. The workshops and models lets city planning becomes an art form and practice.

For architects this is a quick method to start the design process. Users create conceptual designs that architects can later define.

For municipalities and planning agencies, interactive planning is an efficient approach for community outreach and public participation/engagement. The workshops and models address the core issues because the participants do not use abstract language to discuss planning, but physical representation.

For example, when a community member says, "I want a healthy community," What does that mean? When the participant builds a healthy community, we know exactly what they mean. For the public this helps to ensure that the final project or plan is reflective of their needs and original intentions. For community organizers this is method use to create community consensus.

The workshops and models provide a variety of services for a diverse set of needs. Every week I facilitate workshops and every few months create or install interactive models. I have been extremely lucky to be based in LA where there is a creative community to support this process and a diverse community to collaborate with. I have targeted workshops for children or adults or both to create a multigenerational planning process.   I have facilitated workshops in Spanish for Latinos. I have facilitated workshops in Leimert Park for African Americans. I have created interactive model of Chinatown.

All these interactive activities have been successful Workshop topics vary from transportation, economic development, open space, or any urban issues can be addressed through this process.
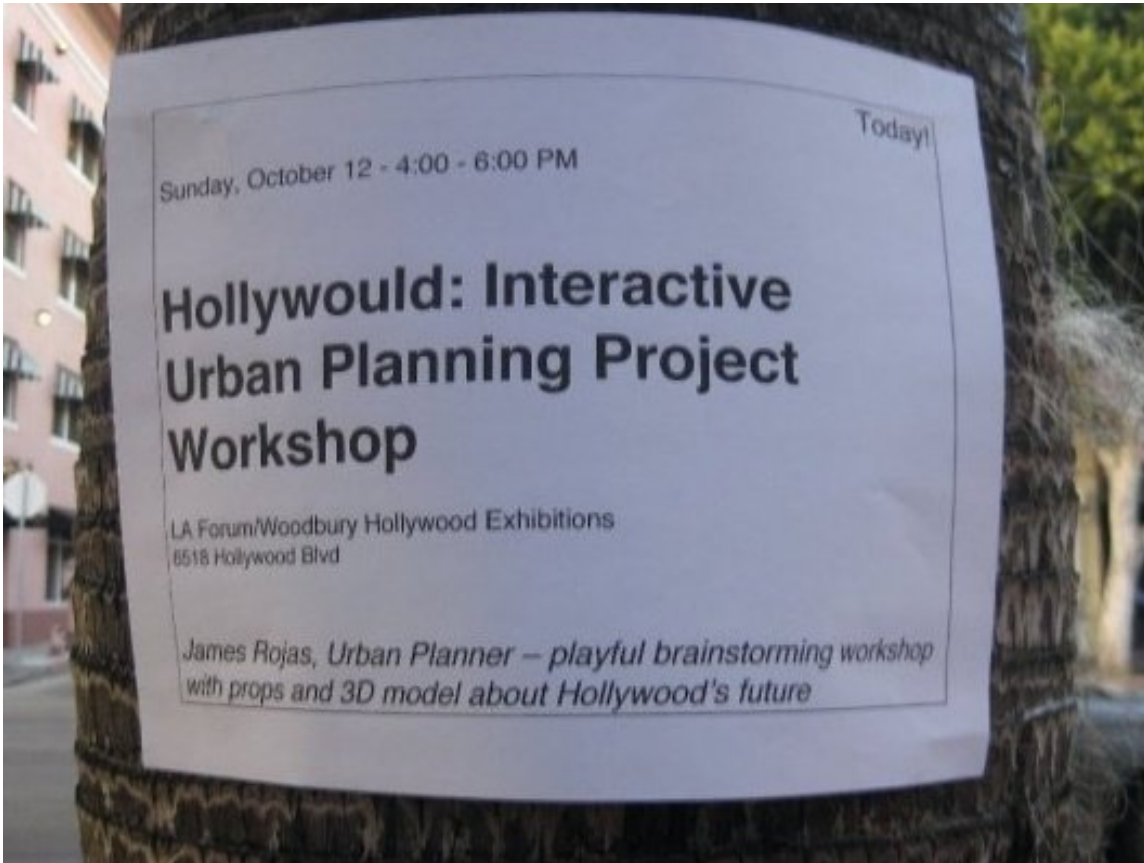
THE POWER OF INTERACTIVE PLANNING!

Urban living assumes the life of the inhabitants. Urbanities rarely have the opportunity to develop their ideas on how to improve urban living or create new ideas. By participating in the workshops, people have time to develop their ideas and create an opinion on how to improve their built environment.

"I went to New York City and rode the subway and it was great. Therefore LA needs to build a subway." The public always says comments like this, which are based off their experiences. What did the person like about the subway? The interactive planning exercise gives the participant time to investigate their experiences and ideas with more depth.

Did the participant enjoy the ride itself, the station, the convenience of walking to it, or the land use patterns around it? By having the participant build, a subway they will discover what they liked best about the experience and what parts of the NYC subway system are adaptable to LA.

After the workshop participants develop an opinion and see landscape with a new set of eyes. I constantly run into people who have participated in one of my workshop. When asked about it, they easily articulate what they learned and created as if it was yesterday.

For example a high school student two years ago participated in a "How to Improve Public Transportation" interactive workshop. A student created a purple and pink light rail line between her and her friends home. The rail line was aligned with trees. Now when she rides the bus or train she looks for trees! This is an example of how the exercise can set the groundwork for people to get people involved in planning.

Community members rarely have the opportunity to come together interact, play, and reflect on their planning values and needs. The interactive planning process creates a safe space that is also an equal playing field for all community members. This mimics the dynamic and collective nature of urban life. These activities reflect how varied groups of players—strangers, neighbors, and friends—interact to create a sense of place in cities and develop an agenda to improve it.

It is powerful to watch participants have so much emotion and conviction in the interactive planning process as they improve their communities. By tapping into the participants' emotion, these ideas become more important to them.

Everyone should have the power to plan his or her community. The planning process should not be relegated to public agencies but performed by everyone. The planning process should be open source and administered by anyone. At the same time policy makers, urban planners, and architects can use this tool for information gathering.

...At the end of the day as urban planners, we create, develop and build or improve cities. The interactive planning process is a powerful exercise that every one can participate in. Planners, however, have shied away from physical planning and instead work mainly on policies. Policies are an abstraction of the built environment that the public can have trouble conceptualizing. Why go through the trouble? We, as planners, need to make the make physical creation of space the driving force behind planning; and place planning in the hands of the public.

FURTHER READING/ EXPLORAT- ION

Visit www.placeit.org

Dr. Pop
http://drop.org/2010/05/james-rojas-the-city-as-play

CHECK OUT THE VIDEOS

Imaginary Transportation
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yyf8QnQUKU

Re-imaging Chinatown
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljvECUP1pUI

Latino Urban Forum
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MppWmsIVi0