COMMUNITIES IN ACTION
The handbook

Scottish Arts Council
LOTTERY FUNDED

ISBN: 0-9542926-5-0

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The University of Strathclyde gratefully acknowledges the support of all the sponsors in the production of this book.

The research was carried out with the support of the Scottish Arts Council, the National Lottery Fund (Grant number: L200110517; Principal investigator: Dr. Ombretta Romice).

All images were taken by the authors unless stated otherwise.

Design from Skratch, Glasgow
www.skratchdesign.co.uk

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people have contributed to the creation of this handbook; without their help this project could not have been completed.
In particular, we would like to thank the sponsors, who provided financial and other direct support:

- The Scottish Arts Council, as the main sponsor of this handbook;
- Hunter Reid and Communities Scotland;
- Steve Arnett and the Centre for the Built Environment;
- Rod Hunter and SHARE (Scottish Housing Association Resource for Education);
- Colin McNeish and Davis Duncan Architects.

Others who greatly assisted us were:

- Susan Morris and all the staff at Parkhead Housing Association;
- Ann Bennet and Gavin Young of Lanarkshire Housing Association;
- Govanhill Housing Association;
- Sean Clerkin and the Larkfield Centre;
- Kristen McGuire and the AYE Drop-in Youth Club, Govanhill;
- Harvey Sussock and the Department of Architecture and Building Science for the time, guidance and intellectual support;
- Mark Greaves at the Planning Department of East Ayrshire Council;
- Michael MacAulay, who was part of the initial bidding team, bringing great insight, enthusiasm and experience to this project.

Special thanks to Tony Dunworth, the designer of this handbook, for his patience and support throughout the process.

Indirect help and backing comes from the work of Henry Sanoff, John Forester, Jane Jacobs, Sam Davis and all those who share their passion and commitment to the built environment, its communities

Significant changes in human behaviour can be brought about rapidly only if the persons who are expected to change participate in deciding what the change shall be and how it shall be made.

(Verba, 1981 in Sanoff, 1990)

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PREFACE

Involving communities in participatory design and supporting their role as informed and critical clients is an increasing concern of our Governments. The 'Communities in Action' handbook is a step in this direction in that it supports community groups that are interested in becoming active in the development of their neighbourhood. By utilising this handbook, participants will identify new techniques helping them become better clients, more critical, aware and interested in the performance of our environment.

The idea behind this handbook lies in the combination of three main interests: area performance, urban design and communication.

The National Lottery Fund of the Scottish Arts Council, the University of Strathclyde, the Centre for the Built Environment, Scottish Homes (Communities Scotland), SHARE and Davis Duncan Architects have supported the creation of the handbook.

The handbook consists of three parts: an introduction on our view on participation, the handbook itself, and a conclusion outlining the potential application of the handbook.

Each participatory method is presented in a standardised format including a description of:

- its remit of competence (where and for what purpose they can be used);
- how to use it in practice;
- how to evaluate and make sense of the information it provides;
- technical details to solve practicalities, examples of its application.

Each method is described through examples mainly drawn from 3 pilot projects that we carried out during the preparation of the handbook. At times though, examples are also drawn from other previous experiences. Examples serve only to show ways of carrying out the exercises suggested; they should not, in any sense, be mistaken for rules.

At the end of the handbook is a list of suggested further reading, which have been found to be inspirational and supportive to the work of communities.

WHY THIS HANDBOOK

Design handbooks to help professionals and community groups play a 'better' role in our cities are not a new idea. Many have been produced since the 1970's and some have been widely used, becoming essentials in the bookshelves of residents' organisations, local authorities and design practices. Still, the results they produce are often limited.

This handbook looks elsewhere, outside the traditional pool of participatory practices. It brings in principles, aids and tools from elsewhere, from disciplines whose main scope is to understand how people and space work together and how to improve their relationships.

After studying the content of current participatory practices, we looked at the way people used them. It occurred to us that often people were engaged in a number of actions weakly related to each other. The lack of a narrative, of a framework behind their participatory effort, was often time consuming and distracting, dispersing energies and commitment across unrelated aims. When this happens, outcomes are disconnected and, as a consequence, their impact limited. The learning experience that derives is also fragmented; the experience generated is weak, and in a community setting, where the need to capitalise on the little resources available is vital, this is certainly not the most efficient way to operate.

Our response was to create a framework of steps to build a comprehensive 'neighbourhood vision', where any information, goal and decision are related; participant roles are clear, and every step belongs to a broader picture that is progressively refined.

A final concern we have about current participation practices has to do with their capacity to be really representative of large communities. It is well known that very few people in a neighbourhood, for example, are willing to be actively engaged in activities concerning their area. Problems arise if the loop doesn't close between those who take part and those who don't. We have respond to the problem by firstly working with, and assisting, the committed few that want to be engaged, and then by bringing their findings back to the community majority, so that their work isn't wasted.

In other words, this handbook seeks to be extensively involving, in a way which is sensitive to what people are prepared to do.