Book review

The Community Planning Event Manual How to Use Collaborative Planning and Urban Design Events to Improve Your Environment

Compiled and edited by Nick Wates. Earthscan, 2008, ISBN 978-1-84407-492-1, **£17.99, 128 pp.**

This is the 'how to' book, par excellence on this subject matter, written by the very best practitioners in the business, with extensive experience of community planning events and a deep commitment to the process. The book tells the reader how to prepare for, organise, run and conclude a successful community planning event in an eminently readable and accessible format. The authors are strong advocates of how well-executed community planning events can benefit the community, the private sector and public authorities alike, and numerous successful case studies are presented as evidence in support of the theory.

The book was first published in 1996 under the title 'Action Planning' and was based on a handbook on 'regional/urban design assistance teams' used in the USA, the content being adapted to include the experience of such events in Europe, at that time a relatively new process. Since then there has been a huge growth in community planning internationally, and in the UK it has become an integral part of the planning process. Parties of all political persuasions are supportive of greater participation in decision-making processes, and the techniques described in this book set out the options that are available, how to make decisions between them and how to orchestrate the event itself.

The book has separate chapters on decisions that need to be made before getting started, the preparatory work that is required in terms of managing and motivating a team, collecting information, and organising venues and materials. Different types of event are described in some detail, and the text helps the reader to identify which might be the most appropriate in any given set of circumstances. Helpful checklists are given as aide memoires, but these also focus the mind on what is essential and what can be left out. Indicative timescales are also given for the lead-in time, the preparatory work and for the event itself.

The book does not offer an academic critique of the community planning concept, but the introductory chapter clearly articulates what a successful event can deliver and the benefits that it can bring. The contributors advocate the use of community planning techniques as an effective tool in delivering sustainable communities and empowering local communities to become actively involved in what goes on in their community. This chimes very well with the mood of modern town planning. Importantly, the book makes a distinction between 'community consultation' (mostly telling people what is happening) and 'community participation', which involves them in the scheme design and decision-making process.

The enthusiasm for, and deep commitment to, community planning as a way of delivering high quality development is evident in the way that the book is written. Numerous examples are cited of where community planning events have led to highly successful outcomes for communities and developers alike, overcoming the barriers of distrust and sectoral divide that are more usually the starting point for conventional public consultation.

Whether the book alone would convince the sceptical reader of the value of such events is hard to say. As a manual rather than an academic review or critique, however, it is immensely valuable, practical, easy to read and would encourage even the least experienced person to feel confident about taking on the task. The skilled practitioner, however, would also find this an excellent reference book.

The manual is of enormous value to anyone working in the development industry: developers, public sector organisations, community groups and professional advisers. As the planning system moves more and more towards a process-driven decision-making framework, with the active participation of local people in that process, this book will become a 'must-have' for anyone engaged in development projects in the 2010s.

Pat Willoughby