Chapter 1
Participatory Design for Under-Represented Communities:
A Collaborative Design-Led Research Approach for Place-Making

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ABSTRACT
Interdisciplinary collaborative design for culturally diverse and under-represented communities hinges on understanding cultural environments; building trusting relationships and fostering a respectful approach to community. It requires a diverse disciplinary knowledge and the capacity to take action by blurring the boundaries between disciplines. This chapter discusses the application of design-led research approach with a participatory design mind-set by bringing the users to the forefront of a design as active co-creators. It examines two projects – a Māori landscape regeneration project in the Wairarapa region of Wellington; and a Tokelau/Pasifika cultural museum exhibition. The research project is framed around three critical stages: design analysis, design exploration and design synthesis. This interdisciplinary collaborative research process can create new opportunities for architectural design education as it educates students and the wider community as active world-citizens.

INTRODUCTION
Community participation has become one of the hot topics for policy development and planning practices across the globe. Over the last decades, a huge effort has been put into bringing more under-represented communities and/or ethnic minorities into the decision-making process that directly affects them, re-
versing the bureaucratic and standardised ‘top-downism’ effect present across several institutions and
decision-making bodies (Mohan, 2007). The research model where the prevailing culture is ‘expert’ that
has typically led practice, has had a long and extensive history in academia. However, more recently
a design-led perspective has move to the forefront the common goal of driving, inspiring and inform-
ing the design process (Vaajakallio & Mattelmaki, 2007). This new approach not only incorporates the
physical dimensions of space but also embeds social relations and subjective human experiences in the
design itself (Schofield & Szymanski, 2011).

Place values are embedded in both the physical space and social environments in which relations are
built upon. Accordingly, the making of place influences both the physical form and the ways in which
communities are created and interact with one another. Place-making is considered an empowering
process where communities are actively involved in maintaining, renovating and representing the places
in which they live. This process implies that places are not by-products of expert interventions but can
accommodate active and on-going participation of the communities themselves (Strydom & Puren, 2013).
Participation in decisions that determine the quality and direction of the built environment requires the
involvement of the community, giving primacy to their right to participate in the shaping of the world
in which they live (Sanoff, 1990). Involving communities in the design process and in decision-making
gives them a feeling of ownership and responsibility towards the surrounding environment as well as
improving their quality of life (Eden, 1996; Lipietz, 2008). This ultimately contributes to a more engaged,
informed and active ‘world-citizen’.

Designing with and for communities is a genuine process which allows for strong partnerships to be
established with those who will use the design outcomes. The process requires that all parties involved
get to know one another and build mutual respect. With this, there is an ethical stand underlying partici-
patory design that recognises an accountability of design to the world it creates and the lives of those
who inhabit it. Morrow (2012) discusses the importance of forming partnerships with local communities
as a way to expand architectural education opportunities and also benefit communities through civic
involvement by students. Live projects are those that engage real citizens in real-time contexts and en-
courage students to become active citizens of a community dedicated to cultural and ecological health.

This alternative approach, where people are treated as active citizens and therefore seen as partners
and active co-creators in the design process linked to place-making, is not straightforward. It challenges
the actions of those researchers and designers who engage in symbolic and figurative activities of ‘win-
dow dressing’ to create an impression of commitment to community development.

The presented design-led research process focuses on the application of a collaborative and interdisci-
plinary participatory process, which requires a sustained period of interaction and relationship mainte-
nance. In this chapter, we discuss a series of participatory activities that were the result of collaboration
between Maori and the School of Architecture at Victoria University of Wellington in one project and
Pasifika community groups with the School in another. In both projects participatory design methods were
employed in the design and development of community facilities and environments for place-making.

This particular study forms part of a series of on-going interdisciplinary and collaborative research
projects supported by the school and university’s strategic plan, which foster experiential learning and
teaching; service learning and engagement; and compliance with the bicultural objectives of New Zealand.
Two student projects are discussed: a Māori landscape regeneration project in the Wairarapa region and
a Tokelau/Pasifika cultural museum exhibition at the Pataka Art + Museum in Porirua. Both settlements
are satellite towns of Wellington’s metropolitan region in the North Island of New Zealand and have
more than 40% of their population belonging to Māori and Pasifika ethnic groups (Statistics, 2013).