

Community-Centered Design Guide

Introduction:

Community-centered design is about shifting power into frontline communities by ensuring that they have a voice in shaping the projects, policies, and investments that directly impact their lives. Far too often, local development decisions are made without the people most affected, reinforcing non-democratic systems and processes that prioritize outside interests over neighborhood stability, cultural identity, and long-term economic activity.

Community-centered design helps ensure investments build long-term community power rather than cause displacement or harm to the communities that they are meant to serve. This guide offers a framework for designing capital projects with communities, not just on behalf of them. The following is a set of practical strategies for equitable community engagement and collaborative project development.



What is Community-Centered Design?

Community-centered design means designing with people and their communities, not just for them. Traditional development often makes decisions first and engages communities later when changes are costly, limited, or no longer possible. Community-centered design flips that approach by involving community members early and continuously throughout the process building trust, strengthening partnerships, and improving project outcomes.

Guiding Principles of Community-Centered Design

Community-centered design starts with relationship-building. It recognizes that lived experience is expertise and that meaningful engagement is not a separate step, but a practice that must be integrated throughout the community development process.

Prioritizing connection with local residents is at the heart of a meaningful engagement strategy. It is also the necessary approach to building trust-based, collaborative partnerships with community members, which is ultimately vital to rooting a capital project in a neighborhood. Meaningful engagement is how a project team incorporates community knowledge into decision-making from the beginning and throughout the process.

As such, a key part of this work is intentionally layering community engagement with technical design. Rather than treating them as separate steps, they should be integrated and reinforced together over time.



The following principles support this integrated, community-centered approach:

1. Ground the Project in Community Vision and Voice

- **Facilitate inclusive and accessible dialogue early and often:** Create open, accessible spaces (meetings, workshops, listening sessions, etc.) with diverse community members to understand community vision, needs, challenges, and cultural context. Do this early, before decisions are made.
- **Define project direction together:** Co-define what the project is, who it serves, and what success looks like before and as design concepts are decided.
- **Center local knowledge and community input in design decisions:** Incorporate community history, traditions, and social dynamics as core inputs into planning and design. Use lived experience to directly shape program elements, site use, and overall project goals.
- **Communicate constraints clearly and timely:** Be transparent about funding, zoning, site conditions, and timelines to ground expectations and build shared understanding.
- **Build trust through consistent communication:** Maintain regular, honest communication so community members stay informed and engaged throughout the process.

Best Practice: Frontload engagement during the 5%–30% design phase, when decisions are still flexible and input can meaningfully shape scope, design, and feasibility.

2. Build Partnerships and Engage the Full Ecosystem of Stakeholders

- **Map project stakeholders:** Identify all key stakeholders, including neighbors, community organizations, public agencies, funders, and regulators.
- **Engage across decision-makers:** Coordinate engagement with stakeholders who influence project feasibility, approvals, and funding to ensure alignment.
- **Include historically excluded voices:** Prioritize outreach to communities that are often left out of planning and decision-making processes.
- **Remove barriers to participation:** Ensure engagement is accessible in location, timing, language, and format to support consistent involvement.
- **Build and maintain partnerships:** Develop relationships with partners who can support implementation, funding, and long-term success.

Best Practice: Building strong partnerships early, especially with public agencies and funders can significantly accelerate approvals and unlock early investment.



3. Co-Design Throughout the Project Lifecycle

- **Bring community into the design process:** Engage community leaders alongside designers and technical experts in deciding project concepts.
- **Use visuals to support participation:** Share concept designs and prototypes (drawings, renderings, and diagrams) when possible to gather feedback and make ideas tangible and easier to respond to.
- **Iterate based on feedback:** Refine designs continuously to reflect both community priorities and technical feasibility.
- **Align vision with feasibility:** Balance community ideas with budget, site, and regulatory constraints in real time.

Best Practice: Integrate community engagement directly into design milestones (5%, 30%) to avoid costly redesigns later.

4. Plan for Sustainability and Local Capacity Building

- **Develop community leadership within the project:** Support residents and local stakeholders to take on advisory roles, provide design input, and participate in project oversight.
- **Prioritize local hiring:** Support local talent and invest back into the community by hiring local workers, contractors, businesses, and offering training pathways.
- **Invest in long-term community capacity:** Build skills and knowledge that enable community members to directly sustain and manage the project.
- **Plan for operations early:** Define who will manage, fund, and maintain the project after construction is complete.
- **Align design with long-term use:** Ensure the project is designed to meet ongoing community needs and operational realities.

Best Practice: Integrate community engagement directly into design milestones (5%, 30%) to avoid costly redesigns later.



5. Integrate Social and Environmental Justice Priorities

- **Address inequities through design elements:** Prioritize projects that improve the built environment, expand access to resources and services, create resilient infrastructure, and increase economic opportunities.
- **Incorporate environmental sustainability:** Integrate green infrastructure, climate resilience, and resource efficiency into design for long-term environmental resiliency.
- **Prevent displacement and harm:** Design with strategies that protect existing communities and promote long-term stability for residents and business owners.
- **Uplift community identity and culture:** Ensure the project reflects and strengthens the community's history, culture, and social fabric.

Best Practice: Aligning projects with equity, economic, and climate goals can unlock additional funding sources and strengthen public support.

6. Engage Community in Monitoring and Evaluation

- **Define success together:** Work directly with community leaders to identify indicators of success within both the process and the final project.
- **Track project progress and outcomes:** Monitor milestones, engagement effectiveness, and project impact.
- **Involve community in evaluation and adapt as needed:** Engage community members in reflecting on what's working and what can improve. Use this feedback to refine the project and inform next steps.
- **Share results back with the community:** Close the loop by reporting outcomes and lessons learned.

Best Practice: Build in evaluation from the start! Funders increasingly value projects that demonstrate clear outcomes and community impact.



Key challenges that may arise

Community-centered design strengthens projects by incorporating community input into a project's decision-making structure while addressing real-world constraints through planning and resources.

The following are common challenges that may emerge during capital project development. They are not signs that community-centered design is not working, but rather opportunities for clear communication, strategic thinking, and relationship-building to balance community vision with practical feasibility.

7. Managing Timing Constraints

Community-centered design requires time to build trust, gather input, and iterate, but sometimes capital projects might need to operate on tight and inflexible timelines driven by funding cycles, political priorities, or site constraints. This can create pressure to move forward before community input is fully incorporated, especially in early predevelopment when engagement matters most.

Example: A team must submit a grant application due in 4 weeks but meaningful community input cannot be gathered in that timeframe. The team therefore decides to move forward with limited or rushed engagement, resulting in a proposal that may not fully reflect community priorities.

How to Troubleshoot:

- Be transparent about timeline constraints and clearly communicate what quick, flexible input can still be incorporated
- Use existing community input (past plans, surveys, or meetings) to inform the proposal, validate key themes
- Use phased engagement such as quick, or existing input now and schedule deeper engagement later



8. Balancing Community Vision with Project Feasibility

Community priorities can often be ambitious and visionary, while capital projects are constrained by budget, site conditions, zoning, and funding requirements. This can create tension when ideas need to be adjusted, scaled down, or phased out and can risk frustration or loss of trust if not handled collaboratively.

Example: A community envisions a large cultural hub with multiple programs, but the available site and project budget can only support a smaller facility.

How to Troubleshoot:

- Share constraints around budget, site, permitting, etc. early and consistently
- Use visuals, design options, and rough cost estimates early to guide visioning, control costs, and communicate tradeoffs
- Explore alternatives with the community, such as prioritizing key features for now and phasing elements over time to meet long-term goals

9. Addressing Engagement Fatigue and Rebuilding Trust

In many communities, past engagement efforts have not led to visible or meaningful change. Over time, this can build skepticism, low participation, or distrust of new projects, especially when engagement feels extractive or similar to past experiences.

Example: Residents at the meeting may choose not to participate, saying, “We’ve been asked before, but nothing ever happened.”

How to Troubleshoot:

- Approach engagement with humility and transparency and acknowledge community concerns and past harm
- Practice clear and consistent communication to build trust and show momentum. Share what is and isn’t within your control, share how their input was used
- As part of trust building, respect and honor residents’ time and expertise by compensating participation when possible
- Bring city or municipal staff along with you - enable residents to address immediate needs and concerns before expecting that folks can engage in conceptual, long-term project planning



10. Improving Representation and Inclusion in Engagement

Community engagement can often reflect the voices of those with more time, access, or familiarity with these processes, while missing others who may be more impacted. This can lead to incomplete or biased input that does not represent the full community.

Example: You notice your meetings are primarily attended by homeowners and retired residents, while renters, youth, and non-English-speaking neighbors are underrepresented or not present.

How to Troubleshoot:

- Conduct targeted outreach through trusted community partners to reach underrepresented groups
- Offer multiple ways to participate, including in-person, virtual, surveys, and pop-up engagement
- Provide language access, childcare, and flexible scheduling to reduce participation barriers

11. Maintaining Engagement Over Time

Capital projects are built over several years, moving through phases that may feel less visible or engaging to the community such as permitting or technical design. Over time, it can be difficult to maintain interest, trust, and participation, especially as community members' availability and priorities change.

Example: Community turnout is strong during early visioning sessions but declines as the project moves into technical design and approval stages.

How to Troubleshoot:

- Set clear timelines and tie engagement to project milestones. Share updates and celebrate progress, like funding decisions or construction updates, to keep everyone informed and motivated
- Keep communication clear, concise, and relevant to what is changing or decided
- Create ongoing roles for community members, such as advisory groups or project ambassadors, to sustain involvement over time

