

## **Community-Built Projects, Processes, and Practices**

(working paper)

**Katherine Melcher**

**University of Georgia**

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by

Katherine Melcher  
University of Georgia  
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## ABSTRACT

The community-built tradition of involving community volunteers in the design and construction of shared places has evolved into a profession consisting of artists, designers, and architects. In order to construct a collective description of these community-built practices, this research searched for commonalities within writings about contemporary, professional community-built projects. Texts from press articles, websites, and books about practitioners who self-identify with the term community-built were analyzed using qualitative grounded theory methods. The results were synthesized into a collective definition of community-built, a description of the types of value that people found in community-built, and an overview of collective beliefs found within the practices and projects.

In general, community-built practitioners believe that building community depends, first of all, on creating and building relationships between people. These relationships are best built within neighborhoods and public places, which, through participation and art, become unique and beautiful.

Local contributions to both the project and the process play functional and meaningful roles in the process. The use of local materials and local content can develop a place with local character. The improvisational nature of the process allows it to incorporate new talents, new ways of giving, and new resources as they arise out of the community. The value of community-built comes from its potential impacts on community groups and society, as well as the actual experience and the meanings it contains for those involved.

## SUMMARY

Throughout history and around the world, community members have come together to build places, be it Amish farmers raising a barn in rural North America, Malian villagers holding a festival to re-plaster their adobe mosque, or neighbors in New York City's Lower East Side turning vacant lots into a community gardens. Even though, in contemporary American society, most public spaces are designed and constructed by local governments and their contractors; the tradition of volunteer-construction continues through the creation of community places in neighborhoods across the United States. In fact, this "community-built" tradition—defined as involving community volunteers in the design and construction of shared places—has evolved into a profession consisting of artists, designers, and architects.

Although there has been little research about community-built practices as a whole, practitioners across several disciplines self-identify with the term. As community-built practitioner Tom Arie Donch (2012) explained, "... even though they were from Habitat or they were painters or they were architects or they were designers all these different fields, we felt that we had more in common than we do with other people in our field."

This research searches for those commonalities within writings about contemporary, professional community-built practices in order to construct a collective description of those practices and to provide preliminary hypotheses on their value and the beliefs they express.

## METHOD

In order to build a collective understanding of community-built from individual experiences, we needed a method that respects the complex and contextual nature of the individual experience but also captures commonalities between experiences. The data needed to be broad enough to capture a range of community-built practices; yet, at the same time, to have enough detail and depth to generate a qualitative understanding of the phenomena. Using written texts as a data source provided a wider range of information than would have been possible through case studies or interviews, but the written texts also contained contextual details not often found in questionnaires or statistical data.

Although academic research into community-built practices is scarce, popular press coverage of individual community-built projects and practitioners is extensive. A search for press articles, websites, and books found ninety-five texts about practitioners who self-identify with the term community-built (defined as people who are or have been members of the Community Built Association (CBA) or people who use the term "community-built" to describe their work).

Forty-two of the texts were written by community-built practitioners, and fifty-three were written by non-practitioners (participants and observers). The selected texts cover the work of eighteen community-built practitioners whose projects range from play spaces (7 practitioners, 49 texts), gathering spaces (5

practitioners, 26 texts), and murals and sculpture (6 practitioners, 19 texts), reflecting the breadth of community-built projects. The selected texts also span all decades from the 1960s to the present day, with the majority of the texts being published in the 2000s (33) and the 2010s (32).

The analysis adapted procedures from grounded theory methods described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and Charmaz (2006) which promote an inductive approach, moving from particular texts to the general, constantly comparing general conclusions back to the original texts in an iterative fashion, while keeping an eye open for recurring themes and metaphors.

The results were synthesized into a collective definition of community-built, a description of the types of value that people found in community-built, and an overview of collective beliefs found within the practices and projects. As the texts were primarily written by community-built practitioners and enthusiastic participants, the resulting description primarily represents the viewpoints of people who place significant value on the community-built experience. It does not represent the entire population or even all people involved in community-built projects. But, as the aim of the research is to understand why people value community-built practices rather than to determine its overall popularity, these biases do not make the data unreliable.

The following description is neither exhaustive nor definitive. The gerunds (defining, finding, envisioning, and constructing) used in the following headers are intended to indicate that not only are the authors of the texts actively creating the concept community-built, but the author of this text is as well. Through this research, she is defining, finding, and envisioning, rather than uncovering a core truth.

## DEFINING COMMUNITY-BUILT

Community-built is a process by which local volunteers come together in a collaborative effort which results in the construction of a shared place and aims to build community as well. Although community volunteers are involved from start to finish, not all parts of a project have to be volunteer-built in order for the project to be considered community-built.

Although the location of projects varies (alleyways, street intersections, church courtyards, schoolyards, vacant lots, and public parks, to name a few), most community-built projects can be categorized into three main types: play spaces, public art, and gathering spaces. Community-built projects can contain more than one of these project types and involve more than one practitioner. For example, in the 1970s, Karl Linn worked with Paul Hogan in creating spaces for play and gathering in inner city Philadelphia. Currently, playground companies such as Leathers and Associates collaborate with community-built artists, such as Sherri Warner Hunter and Laurel True, to incorporate artwork in their playgrounds.

Although the three types of community-built projects serve the different functions of play, artistic expression, and socializing; commonalities in materials,

construction methods, content, and character exist. Community-built projects emphasize locally-sourced materials, in particular ones that are salvaged and reused. Typically, construction methods involve low-tech techniques such as carpentry and masonry. Projects often express local culture and history through the content of the artwork and form of design. The local materials, low-tech methods, and local content all contribute to a character of place that is commonly described as unique, beautiful, and meaningful.

Between the project types, there are significant differences in how the community-built process runs. For example, playground practitioners work in communities across the United States, which limits how much time they can spend in each community. Therefore, they provide a very structured process for the community to follow between their visits. Muralists and gathering space designers tend to work hand-in-hand with the community throughout the process, and their projects usually require fewer volunteers. Nevertheless, the steps are roughly the same: project planning and initiation, fundraising, outreach, design, construction, and stewardship.

The participatory process brings people together (often from different backgrounds) to develop shared goals and then to work towards those goals. Three core principles about participation recurred frequently throughout the texts: (1) everyone should be included, (2) differences and diversity are valuable to the process, and (3) everyone has something of value to give.

## IMPROVISATION

Although community-built processes have similar steps, practitioners describe the process as improvisational. The similes of jazz and dance can describe how the process unfolds: “Up front, people involved need to know that the project is like a jazz band as opposed to an orchestra. This is a different project. Not everything in this type of project can be planned in advance” (Matanovic 2007, 72). Other practitioners use the terms “planned indeterminacy” (Linn 2007, 88) and “chaordic (chaotically ordered)” (City Repair 2006, 140) to describe this balance between structure and openness.

Two examples of structure and openness within community-built are the muralist’s use of a theme and designer’s use of a master plan. This flexibility within a structure allows the process to incorporate new talents, new ways of giving, and new resources as they arise out of the community: “Having no pre-set ideas, I had the freedom to work with whatever resources came my way and with whoever was willing to participate” (Yeh, Moskin, and Jackson 2004, 1).

Several common characteristics seemed to coalesce into two qualities: being open and celebrating local resources. The openness of the process helps bring resources and additional volunteers into the project, so the project can make the best use of resources within the community. Together, these qualities foster a kind of serendipity; the texts contained several accounts of people finding the right materials or skills at exactly the right time.

## FINDING VALUE

People found value in the impacts community-built can have on individuals, community groups, and the neighborhood at large.

Individuals also found value in the experience itself. Participants frequently described the experience as significant and memorable. They expressed dedication to the project; despite rain, sunburn, or sore muscles they continued to work. In several cases, when the playground lived out its 25-year lifespan, the memories are still strong enough to inspire people to undertake another community-built project.

Sometimes the descriptions of this dedication start to sound like an addiction:

- “This is totally addicting,” she said. “I can’t stay away.” (Holly Sutinen qtd. in Schanen IV 2008)
- “they got hooked” (Lilli Ann Rosenberg qtd. in Hubbird 1993, 123)
- “People wanted to do anything they could to be part of this” (Peters qtd. in Schanen IV 2008)
- “because we just wanted to keep going back for more” (Melissa Summerfield qtd. in Hannan 2011, 54)
- “but now I can’t get enough of it” (Mark Doll Schanen IV 2008)

Practitioners (as well as other participants) also find value in community-built because it gives them the opportunity to link their values with their actions. Practitioners, in describing their work, spoke of being motivated by problems they see in today’s society and visions of how to change society for the better.

## ENVISIONING COMMUNITY

Community-built practitioners see alienation and isolation as core problems in contemporary life. To counteract this fragmentation and to create connections, practitioners are inspired by the past – barn raisings being the most frequently cited – for how to build community.

Community-built is based on beliefs that building community depends, first of all, on creating and building relationships between people. These relationships are best build within a community of place – neighborhoods and public places, which, through participation and art, are unique and beautiful.

## THE ROLE OF PLACE

Practitioners believe that places influence how we feel; and that place-based communities, where people of different backgrounds come together, are the most important type of community. The neighborhood scale, as the place in our day-to-day lives where we interact face-to-face, is where community building should occur. Within neighborhoods, public places, as places for sociability, cultural exchange, and the development of democratic values, play a central role in supporting a healthy community.

### THE ROLE OF LOCAL CONTROL

Revitalizing neighborhoods and public places, for community-built practitioners, is directly tied to local participation. Practitioners believe that decisions should be made locally and that people should have the power to change their environments. Being empowered “to create the place where they want to be living” (City Repair 2006, 18), can also nurture values of democracy and a sense of community.

### THE ROLE OF ART

Practitioners believe that vital places are different, diverse, and beautiful. Art can express the uniqueness of a place and its people and bring a sense of humanity back into places. By bringing beauty and meaning into a place, art can also change how people relate to the place and their neighborhood.

These collective beliefs are not uniform across all community-built practices. In fact, practitioners experience some tensions within these beliefs. In participation, valuing differences while seeking a form of unity can create a tension that practitioners can find troublesome and difficult to resolve. In aesthetics, practitioners see how the diversity of contributions can create beauty, yet they also question when to express their own opinions. In promoting local control of place, community-built projects are often in conflict with government, but they often also need support of the government – through approval, permits, access to land, financial support, and maintenance – for sustained success. While community groups often see government as a deterrent to their projects, local governments are often hesitant to embrace community-built projects because of the maintenance costs and liability (Hannan 2011).

Local participation is central to how community-built attempts to build community. The openness and local nature of the process reflects the value placed on local participation. The emphasis on local resources (materials, skills, and funding) not only makes a project feasible, it can also increase the sense of ownership a community has over a project: “Even if the project is publicly funded, community contributions of money, time, or skills are important for creating a sense of community ownership.” (Gude and Pounds 2013).

### CONCLUSIONS

Despite the diversity of community-built projects, some commonalities within the practice exist. Many community-built practices emphasize being open to contributions of all kind, especially those from local sources and local participants. These qualities help bring the needed volunteers and donations into the process, but they also reflect deeply-held beliefs about how best to build community.

The processes and impacts of community-built described in the texts are remarkably similar to those expressed in other research on community arts (Matarasso 1997; Lowe 2000; Wali et al. 2001; Newman, Curtis, and Stephens 2003; Moriarty 2004; McCarthy et al. 2005; Matarasso 2007; Lee 2013). One significant contribution that community-built can bring to community arts is the focus on place. Place-based impacts, such as closer connections to place and

increased neighborhood pride, appear to be an unique contribution that community-built projects can bring to the field of community arts.

Two metaphors found within the texts – addiction and improvisation – suggest that focus solely on social impacts may overlook meaningful aspects of community-built. Thinking of the experience as addiction implies that the benefit people gain is not a rational, calculated one; but something more personal, immediate, and emotional. The metaphor of improvisation suggests that, even if some community-built outcomes are instrumental in nature, the process itself is not. The twists and the turns in the process reject instrumentality; and, for many practitioners, the twists and turns actually give community-built much of its character and value.

The intertwined and mutually-reinforcing natures of community-built qualities, values, and experiences also make reducing community-built to a functional system challenging. Characteristics and qualities are not just selected by their ability to achieve desired outcomes (although they do appear to be effective in that manner); they are also tied to the deeply-held beliefs on what communities are and should be. The desired ends do not determine the means. Instead, the means are more important than the ends: “The process IS the most important product” (Leathers and Associates 2012).

As this is preliminary research into the phenomenon of community-built, there are many directions in which research can follow. These preliminary thoughts on what community-built is and how it works can be expanded, contradicted, or confirmed through direct observation. Impacts can be observed in the field. Tensions in beliefs can be explored, especially as windows into more general social themes, such as individual vs. collective desires, control and resistance, and the definition of aesthetic values. Finally, an inquiry into what factors of community-built facilitate the meaningful experiences described above could help us further understand how community-built works to create attachments to others and to place.

Community-built, although largely overlooked in academia, is well-valued across the United States. Its value comes from its potential impacts on community groups and society at large, as well as the actual experience and the meanings it contains for those involved. As community-built practitioners emphasize the improvisational nature of the process and the importance of that process over final product, attempts to describe it only through impacts can ignore some of its more meaningful and valuable aspects.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history and around the world, community members have come together to build places, be it Amish farmers raising a barn in rural North America, Malian villagers holding a festival to re-plaster their adobe mosque, or neighbors in New York City's Lower East Side turning vacant lots into a community gardens. Even though, in contemporary American society, most public spaces are designed and constructed by local governments and their contractors; the tradition of volunteer-construction continues through the creation of community places in neighborhoods across the United States. In fact, this "community-built" tradition—defined as involving community volunteers in the design and construction of shared places—has evolved into a profession consisting of artists, designers, and architects.

Community-built<sup>1</sup> as a professional practice has existed since the 1960s and 1970s; and the Community-Built Association (CBA), a nationwide group of community-built practitioners, is nearing 25 years of existence. However, there has been little research into community-built practices as a whole. Multiple case studies focus on one project or practitioner (Rofe 1998; Semenza 2003; Hutzel 2007; Semenza and March 2009), and other research investigates one type of project, for example: playgrounds (Daniels and Johnson 2009; Ji 1999; Wilson, Marshall, and Iserhott 2011); murals and community art (Delgado 2003; Rossetto 2012), or community open spaces and gardens (Francis, Cashdan, and Paxson 1984; Lawson 2005; Hou, Johnson, and Lawson 2009; Draper and Freedman 2010). Except for the book, *Community Capacity Enhancement for Social Work Practice* (Delgado 2000), this research has not connected individual cases or project types to the broader phenomenon of community-built.

This research constructs a collective description of contemporary, professional community-built practices<sup>2</sup> from texts by and about those involved in the practice, providing preliminary hypotheses of why people engage in these practices and how the process works.

### COMMUNITY-BUILT AS DEVELOPMENT, DESIGN, AND ART

Delgado (2000) categorizes community-built projects, such as murals, gardens, playgrounds, and sculptures, as a form of asset-based community development which emphasizes local resources and community-controlled, collaborative decision-making.

Similarly, the fields of community design and community art apply an asset-based approach to art and design projects (Sanoff 2000; Matarasso 2007). Community-built can be considered a subtype of both. Like community design, community-built encourages the participation of neighborhood residents and potential users in the design process with the goal of transforming their everyday environments. Like community arts, community-built involves volunteers in a collective process facilitated by an artist or designer in order to create a final artistic product.

Delgado's (2000) definition of community-built, "For a project to be labeled community built, it must meet a set of criteria that stress participation and result

in an environmental change (76)," suggests how community-built differs from other community design and community art practices. Participation, where community volunteers are involved in the entire process including construction, distinguishes the practice from community-design; while the emphasis on environmental change through a built project distinguishes it from other community art practices.

As little has been written about the particular and common characteristics of community-built, literature on community arts and community design can be used to ground this research in existing knowledge. Research in community arts is broader and more developed than that of community design, and therefore will form the majority of sources for this study's literature review.

## COMMUNITY ARTS

Research within the field of community arts consists largely of ethnographic approaches that describe the processes and the impacts of specific projects (Lowe 2000; Wali et al. 2001; Moriarty 2004; Lee 2013), and reports that summarize others' findings (Guetzkow 2002; Newman, Curtis, and Stephens 2003; McCarthy et al. 2005). Researchers commonly focus on the impact the projects have on the development of "social capital" (Wali et al. 2001; Moriarty 2004; Matarasso 2007; Lee 2013). Social capital is a measurement of the relationships (or bonds of trust) within a community. According to the theory of social capital, increasing social capital can translate into a strong network of relationships inside (bonding) and outside (bridging) the neighborhood, which can, in turn, be as significant a resource as economic capital or human capital (Putnam 2000). In general, the theory of social capital operates with the assumption that increasing social capital "makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" (Putnam 2000, 290).

Research has found that community art projects can have positive impacts on individuals, community organizations, and their social relationships. Through community arts participation, individuals can increase their personal development, imagination and vision, and well-being (Matarasso 1997). In terms of social capital, researchers found that community arts projects can bridge differences of race, ethnicity, gender, and class (Matarasso 1997; Wali et al. 2001; Moriarty 2004; Lee 2013), build relationships and support (Matarasso 1997; Lowe 2000; Lee 2013); and develop bonds within minority cultures (Moriarty 2004) and between cultures (Lee 2013). Community arts can also build community groups' capacities to lead future projects (Wali et al. 2001; Matarasso 2007), and develop a sense of solidarity, local image, and identity within the participating group (Matarasso 1997; Lowe 2000; Moriarty 2004).

Preliminary research suggests that community-built can have similar impacts as other community arts projects, such as increased social capital and an improved sense of well-being (Daniels and Johnson 2009; Draper and Freedman 2010; Semenza and March 2009; Semenza 2003).

Although the social impacts of community arts projects are well-documented, critics question the methodologies used in these studies. Guetzkow (2002), Merli (2002), Newman et al. (2003), and McCarthy et al. (2005) criticize community

arts research for consisting largely of self-reported and anecdotal evidence, using poorly-defined measurements, and lacking control groups for comparison.

Therefore, the conclusions of these studies are not generalizable beyond their specific projects. Newman et al. (2003) conclude that, “Quantifying the impact of the arts in terms of *social gain* presents considerable difficulties, arguably greater than any other field of evaluation” (2003, 310).

These methodological challenges might not be due to a lack of rigor in research but to an epistemological mismatch between how we have been researching art and society’s conception of what art is.

First, art impact research tends to define “art as a tool for community development,” (Lowe 2000, 359); while, in practice, many people engage in arts for the immediate experience rather than for specific outcomes. Lowe (2000), McCarthy et al. (2005) and Belfiore and Bennett (2007b) all argue that people can be drawn to the arts because it is a rewarding experience in and of itself.

Through pleasure, aesthetic appreciation, emotional stimulation, and meaning; art can enrich people’s lives in numerous ways (McCarthy et al. 2005). These experiences are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify (Belfiore and Bennett 2007b; Belfiore and Bennett 2010; Belfiore and Bennett 2007a). Consequently, Belfiore and Bennett (2007b) and White and Hede (2008) contend that the value of art is found in each individual’s experience, rather than in its objectively-observable outcomes.

Second, the traditional scientific approach assumes that all processes – including those of art creation and art experience – are instrumental in nature, meaning that they consist of isolatable variables and generalizable outcomes. This technical-rational approach implies that, if we can clarify the variables and the processes, we can control the outcomes by altering the inputs. However, the process of creating and experiencing art is personal and contextual, and not one of detached experimentation or replicable procedures. As the factors, or variables, involved in the art experience “are as various as life itself” (Geertz 1976, 1499), Belfiore and Bennett (2010) conclude that it is impossible to generalize or predict how art will impact people: “the mechanisms by which people might be deeply affected by the arts are still largely unclear, and we simply cannot expect to predict how individuals might react to each art form or, specific artworks” (125).

As factors vary from individual to individual, artwork to artwork, and context to context; Belfiore and Bennett (2007b), McCarthy et al. (2005), and White and Hede (2008) conclude that a full understanding of art needs to start with individual experiences. According to Belfiore and Bennett (2007b), it logically follows that “broad generalizations about people’s experiences of the arts are never likely to be convincing,” (127-127).

This research accepts the proposition that the value of art can be found in individual experiences as well as in measurable outcomes. However, since this study’s goal is to develop a general description about community-built experiences, this perspective raises some challenges. One could argue that an attempt to develop a unifying and generalized description of community-built

practices removes individual context—and, therefore, removes the most important meaning within the phenomena.

## ART WORLDS

Sociology of art and, in particular, symbolic interactionism, provide a resolution to this dilemma. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the value of an experience comes not from measurable impacts but from how the person finds meaning within the experience and then interprets that meaning into action (Blumer 1986). Meaning is built on the individual level, but in reaction to a social world. Through the actions and interpretations of the individual, we can start to see glimpses of that social world.

In a social world, or art world to use Howard Becker's term, "people's collaborative activity ties them into a set of direct relations that have meaning for them" (Gilmore 2009, 149). If "Individual action is, thus, structured by an appeal (deliberate or unconscious) to these shared conventions" (Acord and Denora 2008, 225); looking across individual actions within a specific social world might reveal patterns of an "implicit culture of the field" (Acord and Denora 2008, 225).

Community-built practitioners do see themselves as belonging to a shared field. As community-built practitioner Tom Arie Donch (2012) explained, "... even though they were from Habitat or they were painters or they were architects or they were designers all these different fields, we felt that we had more in common than we do with other people in our field." Therefore, it can be possible that through a collection of individual interactions and interpretations, one can catch a glimpse of that collective understanding that is the social world of community-built.

## 2. METHOD

In order to build a collective understanding of community-built from individual experiences, we needed a method that respects the complex and contextual nature of the individual experience but also captures commonalities between experiences. The data needed to be broad enough to capture a range of community-built practices; yet, at the same time, to have enough detail and depth to generate a qualitative understanding of the phenomena. Using written texts as a data source provided a wider range of information than would have been possible through case studies or interviews, but the written texts also contained contextual details not often found in questionnaires or statistical data.

### WRITTEN TEXTS AS DATA

Although academic research into community-built practices is scarce, popular press coverage of individual community-built projects and practitioners is extensive. A search for press articles, websites, and books written about individual community-built projects found ninety-five relevant texts. These texts, written by practitioners, participants, and outside observers (most often journalists) form the data used in this analysis. Because, through writing these texts, the authors reflect on their experiences and interpret them into a meaningful whole; the texts can be considered valuable narratives for analysis as defined by Chase (2005), even though they are not derived from direct researcher-participant interactions.

### DATA SELECTION

Texts about practitioners who self-identify with the term community-built (people who are or have been members of the Community Built Association (CBA)<sup>3</sup> or people who use the term “community-built” to describe their work) formed the preliminary dataset. Texts about projects that did not involve community volunteers in the design and construction phases, and therefore not meeting the definition of community-built, were excluded from the dataset, as were texts with lists of projects that did not provide in-depth descriptions of the projects or processes.

Ninety-five texts matched the selection criteria: 24 magazine articles, 15 books, 14 newspaper articles, 10 journal articles, 8 online reports, 8 newsletters, 7 websites, 3 blog entries, 2 theses, 2 recorded conference presentations, and one video. Forty-two of the texts were written by community-built practitioners, and fifty-three were written by non-practitioners (participants and observers). A full list of the selected texts is located in the appendix.

The selected texts cover the work of eighteen community-built practitioners whose projects range from play spaces (7 practitioners, 49 texts), gathering spaces (5 practitioners, 26 texts), and murals and sculpture (6 practitioners, 19 texts), reflecting the breadth of community-built projects. The selected texts also span all decades from the 1960s to the present day, with the majority of the texts being published in the 2000s (33) and the 2010s (32).

Since many of the texts were written by community-built practitioners and enthusiastic participants, there is a bias towards depicting community-built practices as positive experiences. Additionally, audience perspectives (people observing and using the place but not participating in its construction) were minimal. The resulting description primarily represents the experiences and viewpoints of people who place significant value on the community-built experience; it does not represent the entire population or even all people involved in community-built projects. But, as the aim of the research is to understand why people value community-built practices and not to determine the extent it is valued within the population as a whole, these biases do not make the data unreliable.

## TEXT ANALYSIS

The analysis adapted procedures from grounded theory methods described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and Charmaz (2006) which promote an inductive approach, moving from particular texts to the general, constantly comparing conclusions back to the original texts in an iterative fashion, while keeping an eye open for recurring themes and metaphors.

In the first step, text related to the following research questions were identified and selected for coding:<sup>4</sup>

1. How is community-built defined?
2. What are the characteristics of community-built projects?
3. How is the community-built process described?
4. What do people involved in the process see as the benefits of the community-built process?
5. What do they see as the challenges of the approach?

Then, this “relevant text” (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003) within each research question was broken down into codes and grouped into categories and subcategories.

The development of these categories formed a preliminary, collective description of community-built projects, processes, and goals. Data from questions 1, 2, and 3, helped identify some common characteristics of the community-built projects and processes. Data from question 4 created a list of potential benefits of the community-built process. Within statements about the benefits of projects, we also found general statements about what kind of society people wanted to create through community-built practices. As these types of statements were more about a vision than a concrete outcome of the process, they were classified as “motivating visions”.

During the analysis of the text, other themes recurred frequently that were not directly associated with a specific research question. For example, having fun and being moved by the experience formed a new “experience” category.

The categories were synthesized into a collective definition of community-built, a description of the types of value that people found in community-built, and an overview of collective beliefs found within the practices and projects. In order to develop this generalized, collective description, the individual and environmental factors in the experience, as defined by Belfiore and Bennett (2007b), were

excluded from this research. These factors add unlimited variety and possibility to the experience, implying that the description of community-built can never be comprehensive. The following description is neither exhaustive nor definitive. The gerunds (defining, finding, and envisioning) used in the following headers are intended to indicate that not only are the authors of the texts actively creating the concept community-built, but the author of this text is as well. Through this research, she is defining, finding, and envisioning, rather than uncovering a core truth.

### 3. DEFINING COMMUNITY-BUILT

*'Community-Built' may be defined as an interactive process that involves the local community in the design, organization, and creation of projects. At its heart is a firm belief in volunteerism, self-empowerment, and the value of community. (Keeler 2008a, 38)*

Community-built is a process by which local volunteers come together in a collaborative effort which results in the construction of a shared place. It “celebrates not only the physical accomplishment of building but also the experience of interdependence and community” (Linn 2007). Although community volunteers are involved from start to finish, not all parts of a project have to be volunteer-built in order for the project to be considered community-built. Major infrastructure and more complex parts can be undertaken by contractors (Danks 2010).

#### COMMUNITY-BUILT PROJECTS

Although the location of community-built projects varies (alleyways, street intersections, church courtyards, schoolyards, vacant lots, and public parks, to name a few), most projects can be categorized into three main types: play spaces, public art, and gathering spaces.

##### 1. PLAY SPACES

The beginnings of contemporary community-built practices can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s when playground designers such as Bob Leathers, Jimmy Jolley, and Paul Hogan began involving community members, especially children, in the design and construction of playgrounds. Their choices of materials differed – Leathers is known for his complex wood structures, Jolley for his creative use of tires, and Hogan for innovative use of discarded industrial and construction materials; but the collaborative natures of their approaches were similar.

Today, most community-built playground professionals work in private companies of two or more employees, and they work with community groups nationwide and sometimes internationally (Leathers and Associates, Learning Structures, and Meyer Design). Recently, the practice has evolved to include the nature-play movement, with practitioners designing natural play areas rather than free-standing play structures (Planet Earth Playscapes and Bay Tree Design/EcoSchool Design).

##### 2. PUBLIC ART

“Using a range of common materials and collaborative approaches, community public artists work in such forms as art parks, ‘garden galleries,’ landscape design projects, playspaces, hand-sculpted and cast seating areas, relief sculptures, columns, archways, and pavements” (Huebner 2013). Murals and

sculptures tend to be the most common forms of community-built art, with mosaics being the most popular medium.

Most community-built artists work on their own as independent contractors (for example, Sherri Warner Hunter, Laurel True, Elizabeth Raybee, and Tom Arie Donch), but some public art practices have evolved into nonprofit organizations serving specific cities and hiring multiple artists at a time (Chicago Public Art Group and the Philadelphia Mural Project).

### 3. GATHERING SPACES

Gathering space designers create spaces where community members can come together. Although the spaces may include play structures or public art, providing a place for interaction drives the project. Gathering spaces can be created out of overlooked places such as road intersections, in-between spaces, and vacant lots. Designers incorporate elements intended to draw people together and to encourage interaction, such as gardens, benches, mail boxes, amphitheaters, tea stands, and book trade stations.

The smallest and most eclectic of the three project types, gathering spaces have fewer practitioners than other types and often focus on a specific locality (City Repair in Portland, OR; Pomegranate Center in the Pacific Northwest; Karl Linn in Philadelphia and Berkeley, and the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia). Although often known for their dynamic leaders, many of these practices have grown into independent, non-profit organizations.

Community-built projects can contain more than one of these project types and involve more than one practitioner. In the 1970s, Karl Linn worked with Paul Hogan in creating spaces for play and gathering in inner city Philadelphia. Currently, playground companies such as Leathers and Associates collaborate with artists, such as Sherri Warner Hunter and Laurel True, to incorporate artwork in their playgrounds.

### PROJECT CHARACTERISTICS

Although the three types of community-built projects serve the different functions of play, artistic expression, and socializing; commonalities in materials, construction methods, content, and character exist.

Materials used on community-built projects range from lumber to mosaics to plant materials; still, locally-sourced materials are emphasized, in particular ones that are salvaged and reused. Typically, the methods of bringing these materials together involves craft, building by hand, and use of low-tech construction methods such as carpentry and masonry.

Projects often express local culture and history through the content of the artwork and form of design. Playground designers often incorporate place-based themes, drawing from local history and architecture. Muralists are more inclined to use social and cultural themes, allowing individuals to make statements about their own life's experiences. Murals can contain political statements, or they can be simply a celebration of the place.

The local materials, low-tech methods, and local content all contribute to a character of place that is commonly described in the texts as unique, beautiful, and meaningful.

## COMMUNITY-BUILT PROCESSES

Between the project types, there are significant differences in how the community-built process runs. For example, playground practitioners work in communities across the United States, which limits how much time they can spend in each community. Therefore, they provide a structured process for the community to follow between their visits. Muralists and gathering space designers tend to work hand-in-hand with the community throughout the process, and their projects usually require fewer volunteers.

Nevertheless, the steps are roughly the same: project planning and initiation, fundraising, outreach, design, construction, and stewardship. Often the project is managed by a core group, “a ‘dream team’ of interested and excited volunteers” (Keeler 2011, 27). Outreach and fundraising start at the beginning of the process, and they continue throughout the entire process. Fundraising can be considered “the biggest obstacle - the most intimidating one, too!” (Megan Dyer and Peter Gibbs qtd. in Keeler 2008b, 171). It involves looking for monetary donations, grants, as well as donations of materials, food, and labor and other in-kind services such as loaning tents, tables, and tools.

Participants work collaboratively with the practitioner to develop ideas for the project. Once a general vision is settled upon, a designer “takes their desires and suggestions and transforms them into a stylized reality” (Schmidt 1986, 32), in other words, into a design. Play space designers often accomplish this through a design day where the designer visits the community for a series of meetings and workshops. Muralists work with the community to decide on a theme around which individual designs can develop. In both approaches, the community is in charge of the theme and vision; and the community is given the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed design before it moves into implementation.

After the design phase, the community (usually the core group) prepares for the build days through additional fundraising, material gathering, work day planning, and volunteer recruiting. For playgrounds, the preparation phases can take anywhere from three months to a year, with an average of five months.

The construction phase, “a big community construction party,” (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 26), differs significantly between the project types. Playgrounds have intense build days over long weekends (an average of 5 days to two weeks) with hundreds of volunteers, while murals can rely on less formal participation and fewer numbers of volunteers. Construction typically ends with a celebration of what the community accomplished.

The end of construction does not mean the end of the project. Hogan observed, “When this nurturing (construction) stopped, the body (playground) began to die” (1974, 141). Community events and additional construction projects can

keep the site alive. Keeler (2008b) suggests that a community-built place “should be built and changed and re-changed on a regular basis.”

### PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION

The community-built participatory process brings people together (often from different backgrounds) to develop shared goals and then to work towards those goals. As participation is a core element in community-built, practitioners stated several principles for how they believe participation should occur.

#### 1. Everyone should be included.

*...that is the nature of community organizing and community build-is that drawing in constantly, inclusion, bringing people together.”* (Donch 2012)

Community includes everyone, and therefore the process should, too.

Practitioners stress the importance of asking who is not already a part of the process and then finding methods to bring them in.

#### 2. Differences and diversity are valuable to the process.

*Our future depends on finding ways to collaborate with people who have divergent viewpoints. Healthy communities transform differences among people into gifts.* (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 20)

In order to have an inclusionary process where debate informs decision making, differences between people need to be negotiated. Within community-built, differences are not just tolerated; they are valued. Practitioners believe that differences are gifts because a diversity of ideas will result in more options, leading to better decisions and better designs.

#### 3. Everyone has something of value to give.

*The leaders try to ensure that the active creativity of each group member is elicited and valued so that it contributes to the give-and-take from which emerges a shared vision.* (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 116)

Inclusion and diversity are valuable to the community-built process because, ultimately, practitioners believe that everyone has something of value to share, “latent talent exists in abundance among many people”(Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 115), “every community has surprise resources and talents” (Keeler 2012, 41), and “each community contains a wealth of latent human and physical resources” (Linn 2007, 201).

### IMPROVISATION

The commonalities listed above might create the impression that the community-built process is an easy step-by-step formula to follow, but it is not: “It is not a science. It’s an art” (Donch 2012). “Projects evolve as different pieces and new players are added. By the time a project is sixty-percent completed it may look very different from the originally envisioned end result” (Yeh, Moskin, and Jackson 2004, 20).

The similes of jazz and dance describe how the process unfolds:

Up front, people involved need to know that the project is like a jazz band as opposed to an orchestra. This is a different project.

Not everything in this type of project can be planned in advance.(Matanovic 2007, 72)

It's like a dance. It's a score. [...] In a sense we are dancing with the community. And, but there are rules, there are patterns, there are techniques, there are things we can use and kind of flow with. In general some of the things are important to do in a specific order, but sometimes you throw them out. (Donch 2012)

As in jazz, our design and building process is conversational and improvisatory, adjusting itself like a meandering river to the terrain. (Matanovic 2007, 25)

Improvisation is employed in tension: a practitioner cannot accept everything into the process. Like in jazz, a structure allows for improvisation, bringing many people into one composition. The process also becomes like a dance, with the practitioner deciding when to follow and when to step in and take the lead:

"I suppose you do let things happen which you think will be more interesting than other things. You do have to have an overall point of view--or you do have one whether you want to or not. (personal interview, April 2,1992)" (Lilli Ann Rosenberg qtd. in Hubbird 1993, 91).

Other practitioners use the terms "planned indeterminacy" (Linn 2007, 88) and "chaodic (chaotically ordered)" (City Repair 2006, 140) to describe this balance between structure and openness.

One example of structure and openness is the muralist's use of a theme within which each person can improvise. Participants share their ideas, and, through discussion, settle on one theme. Then the artist works with individuals to develop ways to express their individual interpretations into images and art. In this way the practitioner can "Give over as much as possible but still keep an eye on the overall project composition" (Laurel True qtd. in Chtena 2011). Another example of structure and openness found within the master plan which can provide a structure for moving forward, but can still "adapt to the shifting needs of their resident populations" (Danks 2010, 14).

This flexibility allows the process to incorporate new talents, new ways of giving, and new resources as they arise out of the community: "Having no pre-set ideas, I had the freedom to work with whatever resources came my way and with whoever was willing to participate" (Yeh, Moskin, and Jackson 2004, 1).

## QUALITIES OF COMMUNITY-BUILT

The characteristics identified in this report have multiple functions within community-built projects. For example, utilizing local and salvaged materials supports the value of thrift and environmental sensitivity, and it also adds meaning to the project through local references, one-of-a-kind materials, and materials that reflect the passing of time.

Multiple characteristics also reinforce each other. Several characteristics seem to coalesce into two main qualities: being open and celebrating the local.

In addition to the improvisational nature of the process, the materials and methods also create an openness in the process. They value what each participant can bring in terms of materials, construction abilities, and knowledge; thereby encouraging people to join in, no matter what they have to contribute: “The use of familiar materials engages the energy of many participants,” Weber explains. “Adults who are too inhibited to join a painting team will help lay pavement, mix cement, etc.” (Gude and Pounds 2013).

Local materials, local artwork, and local content can “build [...] local character into the project” (Matanovic 2007, xi). Additionally, participatory processes and local decision-making can guide the choices made within the project, all resulting in a process that celebrates “local choices, resources, and sensibilities” (Matanovic 2007, x).

Both these qualities have practical functions. Relying on local resources can make a project more affordable. An openness helps encourage participation, bringing in the volunteers needed to get the tasks done.

In addition to making the project more affordable, the openness to new contributions help bring resources and ideas into the project, so the project can make the best use of resources within the community. Together, the qualities foster a kind of serendipity, with people finding the right materials or skills at exactly the right time:

Wagner ticks off a list of serendipitous local talent discoveries. The museum artist who crafted the dinosaur print sculptures for the park, the planners and construction workers, the PR and marketing whizzes. (Hannan 2011, 55)

When they needed last-minute donations, such as sod and backfill early on Sunday morning, Fuller and Henningson just rifled through the phone book. So involved was the community that ‘if you needed something, you just got on the phone and before long a truck would drive up’ (Henrich 1990, 31).

## 4. FINDING VALUE

*At 5 p.m. Sunday, work stopped. The project, with the exception of concrete work, was finished. Volunteers, many with tears in their eyes, stood staring at what they had done, shaking hands and hugging one another. “People say small towns and close-knit communities are disappearing,” Mayer said. “Not here. Just look at what this community came together to accomplish. The only word for it is amazing.” (Schanen IV 2008)*

As the above statement implies, the value of community-built can be found not only in its outcomes (the project was finished), but also in the emotional experiences (tears in their eyes, shaking hands and hugging one another) and in an ability to act on deeply-held values (small towns and close-knit communities are disappearing).

## VALUING IMPACTS

*The Community Built Process is an amazing way to build a natural playscape that not only creates amazing spaces for children, but saves money, strengthens ties to the community, builds lasting friendships, fosters a sense of pride and ownership in the project, and helps ensure the playscape’s long term care and maintenance. (Earthplay 2012)*

Practitioners, participants, and observers described community-built practices as having multiple positive impacts on individuals, their relationships, community groups, and neighborhoods. Community-built projects, through volunteer labor and local donations, can be more affordable than conventional projects. But, at the same time, they require a significant commitment of time and effort. For many community organizations<sup>5</sup>, motivations to undertake such a project extend beyond affordability to potential social impacts, such as fostering community identity, reducing crime, empowering local citizens, and improving cohesiveness.

Community groups often undertake community-built projects in order to increase their capacity to facilitate future change. They reported increased involvement, increased enthusiasm, and more successful fundraising, as well as increased cohesiveness and community spirit. Others improved their relationships with local governments and their ability to lobby for local change.

By far the most common evidence of community capacity building was that community groups went on to work on new projects: “Possibility playground will be a great resource, but an even more valuable one is the band of motivated citizens who created it. There is much to be done in this community, and they’ve

shown they know how to do it. We have no doubt they will answer another call” (Schanen IV 2008). Projects also generate enthusiasm that spreads: “The most universal result of a successful mural project is the public’s desire for another mural” (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 91).

## VALUING EXPERIENCES

*“It got personal for me.” (Mark Doll qtd. in Schanen IV 2008)*

Participants describe the community-built experience in personal terms, as “a heck of a lot of fun” (Doug Cvetkovich qtd. in Schanen IV 2008), and “the most amazing experience I’ve had the honor to be a part of” (John Dohrwardt Jr. qtd. in Schanen IV 2008).

Despite “sore muscles, bee stings, sunburn,” they still “loved every second of it” Mark Karrels qtd. in (Schanen IV 2008). Others “were drenched with perspiration as the temperature reached almost 100 degrees but the group remained dedicated to completing the job for the children of the community” (“Bradenton Gladiators Help Build Playground for Community Kids” 2009). Some participants returned day after day to finish what they started and even to redo parts that they felt were not perfect the first time.

Sometimes the descriptions of this dedication sound like addictions:

Holly Sutinen of Saukville, who spent Tuesday, the first day of the project, hauling lumber, was drilling holes and driving screws by Friday. **“This is totally addicting,” she said. “I can’t stay away.”** (Schanen IV 2008).

When I asked them what they thought the benefits of this project were, Lilli Ann noted that as the men got involved in the project, **“they got hooked.** A number of them forevermore will be different” (telephone interview, October 30, 1991). (Hubbird 1993, 123).

Peters said. **“People wanted to do anything they could to be part of this”** (Schanen IV 2008).

Melissa Summerfield, who helped build Dinosaur Play-ground in Bozeman, Montana, says of the building days, “The energy and excitement were so attractive. My husband and I kept trying to figure out how we could get more babysitting help, because **we just wanted to keep going back for more.**”(Hannan 2011, 54) .

Mark Doll, a sheet-metal worker for J&H Heating who served as a captain, said, “When I first heard about this project I thought it sounded pretty neat, but now **I can’t get enough of it....**” (Schanen IV 2008). (emphases added)

Addiction or not, there is something about the experience draws people in, keeps them coming back, and creates significant memories: “It was also one of the MOST rewarding projects that I have ever participated in and it did as much or more for me personally as it did for the community. I haven’t been the same since!” (Jill Elizabeth qtd. in Keeler 2008b, 198).

In several cases, when a playground lives out its 25 year lifespan, the memories are still strong enough to inspire a community-built project to replace the old one. Leathers and Associates (2007) report that many of their original clients from 25 years ago are coming back to re-build their playgrounds.

### VALUING A WAY OF LIFE

Practitioners, like participants, find the community built experience fun and rewarding: “ ‘We just couldn’t stop. It was just too much fun,’ Magowan [of Learning Structures] said, smiling.” (Higgins 2001). But, practitioners (as well as other participants) can also be motivated by what they want to see in the world and how they think we should achieve it. Community-built can be valuable to them because it gives them the opportunity to link their values with their actions:

*“For me, being an artist is not just about making art, it is a way of life. It is about delivering the vision one is given, about sharing one’s gifts freely, and about doing the right thing without sparing oneself. If one does that, one can eventually become truly free” (Yeh, Moskin, and Jackson 2004, 8).*

Practitioners, in describing their work, spoke problems they see in today’s society and visions of how to change society for the better. These motivations and visions form the collective beliefs (or way of life) described in the next section.

## 5. ENVISIONING COMMUNITY

*Looking back (although I acted intuitively) I was guided by strong principles. (Yeh, Moskin, and Jackson 2004, 4)*

Community-built practitioners see alienation and isolation as core problems in contemporary life. Social fragmentation can lead to conflicts. With a lack of connection, differences become threats and people feel either excluded or helpless; and “Solutions to many urban issues, including crime, unstable local economies, deteriorating educational systems, broken families, homelessness, discrimination, pollution and loss of green space seem unapproachable when we view them from a perspective of isolation” (City Repair 2006, 15). At the same time, we, as humans, “crave deep interactions” (City Repair 2006, 13) and rootedness and belonging.

To counteract this fragmentation and to develop a sense of connectedness, practitioners are inspired by the past – barn raisings being the most frequently cited – for how to build community. By building together, people develop a genuine concern and care for others. Community-built as a “process of people coming together around common values, and developing their sense of solidarity” (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 72) can create a community that acts as an extended family in the amount of support, compassion, and care that comes from it.

In community-built, participation, place, and art play key roles in building and rebuilding these relationships: “Public places are the geographical glue that binds a community together” (City Repair 2006, 119); likewise, “[art] is the cement that holds the community together” (Lily Yeh qtd. in Young 2006, 20), and “collective creativity is the glue that brings us closer (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 5). The following is a summary of beliefs about how these three aspects can interact to build community.

### THE ROLE OF PLACE

*Our physical surroundings have a deep impact on our experience of life. Drab surroundings leave us depressed. In impersonal, institutional settings, we feel alienated and isolated. Such regimented settings foster passivity. (Linn 2007, 8)*

If our environment impacts how we feel, then places may contribute to contemporary problems as well as to their possible solutions. Practitioners criticize the isolation of suburbs, the emphasis on car traffic, and dreary public spaces as resulting in neighborhoods that are “lonely places that devalue and even preclude human encounter” (Matanovic 2007, xi), and are made up of “agglomerations of transient strangers” (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft 1977, 72).

Neighborhoods play a central role in place-based community building because:

A neighborhood is a place where people converge to realize their lives. ... in a neighborhood, people get to know each other in the multiple roles they play – as neighbors, parents, and partners. In our neighborhoods, we practice the art of living, and engage in the most essential human activities as we raise children and care for and nurture one another. (Linn 2007, 202)

Within neighborhoods, “public spaces where we bump into each other, meet, and mingle with our neighbors can be important stepping stones for building strong communities” (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 28). As neighborhood public places can be places for sociability, cultural exchange, and democracy, one can conclude that “strong, connected communities of place form the building blocks of a healthy, democratic society” (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 1).

### THE ROLE OF LOCAL CONTROL

Revitalizing neighborhoods and public places, for community-built practitioners, is directly tied to local participation. For place-based community to be built, community residents need to be actively involved:

*The ultimate in playgrounds, to me, are people's parks – play places built and maintained by the people of a community, rather than by some distant city hall...They are needed and are important for the development of community spirit. (Hogan 1974, 164)*

Practitioners believe that decisions should be made locally and that people should have the power to change their environments: “ ‘It’s about the importance of people being able to modify their environments, about residents having a role in the design of their public space,’ emphasizes Jon Pounds, Chicago Public Art Group’s director. ‘Not only imagining, but changing—actually shaping their world.’ ” (qtd. in Gude and Pounds 2013).

Being empowered “to create the place where they want to be living” (City Repair 2006, 18), can also nurture values of democracy and a sense of community:

Community control of these small-scale neighborhood commons gives residents a place where they can take a stand...As people realize their shared vision by successfully constructing a commons through cooperative efforts, they are empowered to take on larger issues. (Linn 2007, 204)

Perhaps most important of all, young people learn—through the principles of participatory democracy and civic responsibility—how creating a sense of community takes more than just building with bricks and mortar. (Gude and Pounds 2013)

## THE ROLE OF ART

Not only is participation important in revitalizing place, but art is, too. Practitioners believe that places should be different, diverse, and beautiful: “Make it beautiful, interesting and meaningful. It is an expression of your community’s local culture” (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 29).

Art can express the uniqueness of a place and its people. Also, art can “transform the grittiness of everyday life into energy, beauty, joy, strength, to help us face the future” (Lily Yeh qtd. in Young 2006, 27). Through meaning and beauty, art can bring a sense of humanity back into places: “We reclaim character and uniqueness. If all we see are concrete, straight lines and bland colors and shapes, we will have tidy ‘commercial and residential complexes’ but not true communities. The losers are beauty, nature, and humanity” (Matanovic 2007, xii).

By bringing beauty into a place, art can change how people relate to the place and therefore to their neighborhood: “When beauty is baked into the design, more people use our malls, streets, bridges, and town squares and they do it with more enthusiasm, civility, and respect” (Matanovic and Orseman 2014, 29).

The collective beliefs described above are common themes found within the texts. But they are not uniform across all practices or projects and or even within one practice or one project. In fact, these collective beliefs contain several tensions.

## UNITY AND DIFFERENCE

“Try to incorporate each person’s opinions, while still keeping an overall common theme or aesthetic that unites the elements of your Intersection Repair” (City Repair 2006, 83). In participation, community builders emphasize valuing everyone’s input and finding value within diversity and differences. At the same time, they seek to create a unity – in a unified composition, in a final product, and in a strengthened community. Valuing differences while seeking a form of unity can create a tension that practitioners sometimes find valuable, yet at other times, find troublesome and difficult to resolve.

## AESTHETIC VISION AND COMMUNITY ART

“Learning when to accept the stylistic differences that come out in collaborative projects, versus when to pull misplaced tiles and make corrections if the original vision is lost, was not always easy, but it was discussed and exercised” (Raybee 2013). Practitioners also experience tension between their personal aesthetic vision and the aesthetic outcomes of the group process. One hand, the diversity of contributions can be considered beautiful. On the other, professionals have their own opinions, too.

## LOCAL CONTROL

By undertaking a participatory project in a place, community-built encourages local control of the environment. While community-built project are often in resistance to government, they often also need support of the government –

through approval, permits, access to land, financial support, and maintenance – for sustained success. While community groups often see government as a deterrent to their projects, local governments are often hesitant to embrace community-built projects because of the maintenance costs and liability (Hannan 2011).

## QUALITIES AND BELIEFS

To summarize, community-built is based on beliefs that building community depends, first of all, on creating and building relationships between people. These relationships are best built within a community of place – neighborhoods and public places, which, through participation and art, are unique and beautiful.

At times the relationships between place, participation, and art seem circular. Participation creates active places, and participation in art can create beauty. In turn, vital places and an environment filled with art can influence participation: “An environment that lacks the imprint of personal or communal art or craftsmanship does not encourage participation and creative expression” (Linn 2007, 8).

No matter which comes first, participation is central to the concept of community building. So much so, that several practitioners emphasize that the participatory process is more important than the final outcome: “Citizen involvement, participation and collaboration are the heart of the project, and often even more important than what may be physically built as a result” (City Repair 2006, 44).

The centrality of local participation to the collective beliefs parallels the central qualities of localness and openness. This suggests that encouraging participation and valuing local contributions function to not only make the project more affordable and feasible, but also to reflect deeply-held values central to community-built practices.

For example, the emphasis on local resources (materials, skills, and funding) not only makes a project feasible, it increases the sense of ownership a community has over a project: “Even if the project is publicly funded, community contributions of money, time, or skills are important for creating a sense of community ownership.” (Gude and Pounds 2013).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the diversity of projects, commonalities between community-built practices exist. Many community-built practices emphasize being open to contributions of all kind, especially those from local participants. These qualities help bring the needed volunteers and donations into the process, but they also reflect deeply-held beliefs about how best to build community.

The community-built processes and outcomes described in the texts are remarkably similar to community arts processes and outcomes described in past research. For example Lowe's (2000) description captures much of what happens in community-built processes:

First, the coming together for the purpose of doing art is a structured interaction in a public setting that uses an inclusive decision-making process. Second, not only is there a shared goal of creating art together as an outcome, but there also is an explicit process goal of building community. Last, the common mood is lighthearted and playful.

Place-based characteristics, such as reused materials and low-tech methods, and place-based outcomes, such as closer connections to place and increased neighborhood pride, are the unique aspects that community-built can bring to community arts.

Two metaphors found within the texts – addiction and improvisation – suggest that focus solely on social impacts may overlook other meaningful aspects of community-built. Thinking of the experience as addiction implies that the benefit people gain is not a rational, calculated one; but something more personal, immediate, and emotional. The metaphor of improvisation suggests that, even if some community-built outcomes are instrumental in nature, the process itself is not. The twists and the turns in the process reject instrumentality; and, for many practitioners, the twists and turns actually give community-built much of its character and value.

Improvisation and the intertwined and mutually-reinforcing natures of qualities, values, and experiences also suggest that framing community-built processes as instrumental does not capture the most important aspects of the process.

Characteristics and qualities are not just selected by their ability to achieve desired outcomes (although they do appear to be effective in that manner); they are also tied to the deeply-held beliefs on what communities are and should be.

The ends do not determine the means; instead, the means are more important than the ends. As Lily Yeh remarks, “the right process becomes the right product” (qtd. in Yeh, Moskin, and Jackson 2004, 19), Leathers and Associates explain, “The process IS the most important product...” (Leathers and Associates 2012), and Lilli Ann Rosenberg concludes, “The final mural will be effective if the process of creation has been exciting and satisfying” (Rosenberg and Wittenberg 1968).

Perhaps the very aspects that make community-built non-instrumental, such as the addictive experience, the improvisational process, and the influence of values on qualities of the practice, are also some of the more significant aspects in terms of how the process becomes meaningful to people, or “how arts operate their magic” (Belfiore and Bennett 2007b).

As this is preliminary research into the phenomenon of community-built, there are many directions in which research can follow. Now that a rough frame of understanding exists; the thoughts on what community-built is and how it works presented here can be expanded, contradicted, or confirmed. Impacts can be looked for in other community-built projects. Tensions in beliefs can be explored, especially as windows into more general social themes, such as the individual vs. collective, control and resistance, and the definition of aesthetic value.

Another research question to explore in more depth is that of attachment. Through this process, how do people become attached to the process, to the place, and to others? Although individual factors play a large role in developing attachments, are there some common factors within community-built that facilitate these connections? The exploration of these questions within community-built could help inform place attachment research, as it is rare to have a discreet event (rather than an evolution over time) that purports to create these attachments.

Community-built, although largely over-looked in academia, is well-valued across the United States. Its value comes from its potential impacts on community groups and society, as well as the actual experience and the meanings it contains for those involved. As practitioners emphasize the improvisational nature of the process and the importance of that process over final products, describing community-built solely through its impacts can overlook some of its more meaningful aspects.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, "community-built" used as a noun refers to the entire phenomenon of community-built, including projects, processes, experiences, and practices.

<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on community-built practices that are facilitated by a professional "community-builders," even though there are many community-projects implemented solely by volunteers.

<sup>3</sup> The CBA has been in existence for 24 years, and many of its founding practitioners started doing community-built work in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Members of the CBA are considered experts and leaders in the community-built process.

CBA membership was determined through membership lists spanning 2008–2012 and the author's own knowledge of the history of CBA. Practitioners who use community-built to describe their work could have been CBA members in the past. Names of CBA members (both individuals and organizations) and the term "community-built" were searched in multiple citation indexes, Google Scholar, and Google for articles, books, and on-line articles written about their work. CBA members' websites were also searched for descriptions of the community-built process and links to press articles about their work.

<sup>4</sup> NVivo software was used to organize the datasets and the coding.

<sup>5</sup> Community groups refer to both formal and informal organizations involved in the project, and both groups that existed before the project started and ones that formed during the process.

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