



Key Points:

- Designing homes that reflected democratic values and created opportunity for everyone to live in and grow in environments that connected them to nature.
- Democratic designs resulting without a democratic process may have the intentions of best serving the people.



Samantha “Sami” Szeszulski, Assoc. AIA is a designer with a passion for programming, planning, and user engagement. She received her B.S. in Architecture from LTU and her MArch degree from the UD Mercy, with an elected focus in Community Development. Sami is the previous AIA Michigan Associate Director and Regional Associate Director on the National Associates Committee. She is the 2018 recipient of the AIA Detroit Associates Honor Award.

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Democratic Design vs Designing Democratically Sami Szeszulski, Assoc. AIA; Stantec

Of the People, By the People, For the People

The idea of “design for democracy” has been around at least since Frank Lloyd Wright began pursuing an “architecture for democracy.” He was striving to create an architecture for a free and democratic people, across America. This meant designing homes that reflected democratic values and created opportunity for everyone to live in and grow in environments that connected them to nature. He was striving for an architectural style that reflected America, while being diverse enough to reflect the various natural contexts across the country. He is widely known for promoting and popularizing progressive design ideals. While Wright may have been one of the earliest, he is not the last architect or designer to tout the idea of creating democratic designs. In current context, we use the term in association with companies like IKEA, which strives to provide good quality designs to everyone at an economically conscious price tag. IKEA bases their designs around five principles: form, function, sustainability, quality, and low price. One can see how some or all of these principles translate into values for designing democratic architecture.

While these design principles are valuable to aspire to, alone they do not cause democratic design. They are flawed in their process and the universality of their approach. Democracy is first and foremost about process. Democracy, simply put, is a decision-making process by a large population. While this often occurs through elected representatives, the intention is to provide a voice to the whole population it serves. Democratic designs resulting without a democratic process may have the intentions of best serving the people, but those intentions cannot be confirmed until tested through a larger participatory process. The idea of “...of the people, by the people, for the people...” is ingrained in America’s Democratic ideas. While many designers strive to design for the people, it is the authorship aspect that is often minimized or lacking in the process.

The Value of Participatory Processes in Design

I prefer the mantra of “nothing about us, without us, is for us” to describe the importance of participatory processes in design. Too often, designers and architects are quick to assume they know the needs of the community or users, based on their own limited knowledge or experience. They then try to present a conceptual design to the client and community, which often leaves little to no room for input or feedback. While the best





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of intentions might be present, no designer can capture the specific needs of all users of a project without hearing all the various viewpoints. The misconception is that architects are the experts, and the community or client is to benefit from our design expertise. But the community – the users – are the experts on what they need from their built environments; from how the space needs to function, to stylized design approaches that may or may not be the right approach for their community. The expertise of the designer should be to facilitate the collection of these important pieces of project-specific knowledge and bring to the table ideas that the client or community may not be already thinking about. The designer is only one of what should be many perspectives in a room of decision makers. It is their job to take the collection of ideas and priorities presented and to organize them into a cohesive design that should then be tested, and retested, by the community.



The value of participatory processes in creating a design solution is great. Design is about place, and the people who live in those places. Successful design is not neutral. It must reflect something and someone, or else it is reflective of nothing at all. It is personal, not to the designer and his or her values, but to the values of the community that is to utilize it. The goal should be to create ownership of the design by the community. Upon completion, they should be able to walk into a space and visually see the impact their input has had on the design.

How Do We Design Democratically?

As important as the why is the how. How do we build trust in a community? How do we collect the local expertise? How do we resolve all the information we receive? And how does that information get reflected in the design? While there are several published resources developed on the possible methods, the approach should be tailored to the specific community. Again, there is no universal approach to democratic design—in process or deliverable—but there are some common priorities to be considered.

First, prioritize getting people to the table. Without having the community present, there is no chance for their voices to be heard. Communicate with them through the means they use to share and receive information. Be present when and where they're present. Come to them, where they're comfortable, and at their convenience.



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Next, create a dialogue. Prioritize listening while letting them speak; if you spend your time with the community only speaking about your ideas, you’re limiting their opportunity to share their knowledge with you. Ask questions, and then let the community own the conversation. Reiterate what you’ve been told, so that they know you’re listening—which builds trust.

Democratic design processes are transactional and iterative. They require giving and receiving between designers and the community, but also between members within the community itself. Not everyone is going to agree, and that’s okay. But by allowing everyone to be a part of the conversation, a consensus can be reached, and everyone is able to understand the “why” behind each decision that was made.

Just as democratic design solutions are specific to people and place, the democratic design process should be. To serve the people, they must come from the people. It is only through a democratic design process that democratic design can be created, and the level to which the process is made inclusive will be reflected in the success of the design