

CHARRETTE BASICS

USAGE OF THE TERM

The usage of the word "charrette" is very much like the use of the word "safari." You're "on safari" if you're hunting, just as you're "on charrette" if you're at the charrette. The event itself, however, is referred to simply as a "charrette."

ORIGINS OF THE TERM

"Charrette" is the French word for "little cart." The Ecole de Beaux-Arts was the great French school of architecture. It was based in Paris; the very best American architects studied there in the 19th century. Having attended the Ecole practically guaranteed a person an illustrious and successful career. The Ecole's rigorous method was based on design instruction in a series of ateliers (studios) where professors (who were usually also practicing professionals) assigned work to students, who then took the work home to their apartments to work on it. Each project was due at a particular time, at which time the professor sent a charrette through the streets of Paris to collect the work. When the students heard the wheels of the charrette clattering over the cobblestones of the Parisian streets, they would hurry downstairs with their work. In most cases, they were not finished, so they would spring up onto the charrette with their drawings and frantically work to finish them as they bounced down the streets. This period of frantic design activity within a tight time constraint came to be known as being "on charrette."

MODERN CHARRETTES

More recently, the modern charrette began to develop in fits and starts beginning in the 1960s and 1970s. New Urbanists picked up on the process in the mid-1980s and have transformed it into a highly precise art form. The modern charrette contains the following elements:

TEAM MEMBERS

There are two teams: the Client Team (those that are paying for the work) and the Design Team (those that are getting paid.) Their details are as follows:

CLIENT TEAM: The entity paying for the charrette is encouraged to bring everyone within their organization that will be directly working with the project. For planning projects, this includes the executives, any on-staff construction professionals or design professionals and the sales force.

DESIGN TEAM: The design team includes everyone that would, under the conventional model, be working on the project in their respective offices. This includes both the core design team and all consultants. For planning projects, consultants include the landscape architects, the civil engineers, the transportation engineers, the market survey people, the marketing people,

the rendering artists and any architects that might be involved. The core design team is made up of the Project Director, the Project Designer and the Project Manager. The Project Director is the person who runs most of the public meetings; they are also a primary design critic. The Project Designer often isn't determined until the design converges on their design. The Project Manager is what the name implies.

TIME

The time is limited. Some charrettes may be as short as 2 days, whereas others last as long as 8-10 days. 8- or 9-day charrettes are considered standard by many New Urbanists. Within each day, the schedule may be grueling, so it should start in a civilized manner. We start with a good breakfast at the team hotel or inn, then begin work at 9 AM. Most of the workdays are 11-12 hours long, except at the end. For the last night of the charrette, the team is divided into a presentation team and a production team. The people responsible for the final presentation the next evening leave early; in no case, any later than 11 PM so that they will be fresh. The presentation team is usually small; often no more than 2-3 people. The production team is usually larger; in most cases, they consist of the rest of the design team. They stay as late as necessary; all-nighters are infrequent but not unheard-of.

SPACE

The charrette takes place in a single studio space where the entire design time is working in one room together. The design studio is usually adjacent to the meeting room, so that design team members who are not involved in a particular meeting can nonetheless hear the proceedings of the meeting. One or two small conference tables are usually worked in at the perimeter of the room for smaller focused meetings with targeted special attendees.

ATTENDEES

The general rule of thumb is that anyone with any stake in the project should be invited to the charrette. Generally, these fall into three categories, which are detailed below:

PUBLIC SECTOR: The public sector includes all regulators who will have any say over the project. For planning projects, this includes the mayor and city council or county commissioners and their chairperson and any other appropriate elected officials, the planning department, the engineering department, the fire department, the utility department, private utility companies (cable, telephone, etc.), regional authorities (economic, planning bureaus, etc.), environmental regulators, school boards & officials, libraries & other public institutions and any state or federal regulators involved.

PRIVATE SECTOR: The private sector includes all associations and trade groups that may have an interest in the project. For planning projects, these include the Chamber of Commerce and other trade groups, YMCAs and other recreational

groups, churches and other religious groups, economic development groups, the historical society, realtors, the home builders' association, home owners' associations and social groups (garden clubs, women's clubs, Rotary, Lions' Elks', etc.)

PRIVATE ATTENDEES

This group includes any private citizens not associated with any particular group. It is obviously helpful to invite anyone who will support the project. It is not as obvious, but it is equally helpful if not more so to invite any who could be considered a stake-holder that will oppose the project. Many of them will not attend, but if they complain about the results of the charrette later, their fellow-citizens will remind them quickly and loudly that they had an opportunity to make their voice heard and passed it up.

INVITATION METHODS

There are several ways to get people to attend a charrette. Specific personal invitations should clearly go out to everyone in the public sector list, and to people on the private sector list important enough to be targeted. There are several methods of getting other private attendees to show up. They include the following:

PUBLIC TV:

The local public TV channel often is looking for exactly this sort of thing to fill their airtime. Advertise there early and often. Some of them will also run wall-to-wall coverage of the charrette itself at no cost to the team. The only thing that shouldn't be broadcast are the design sessions themselves because it is too easy to alter one's normal brainstorming process because of being on-camera.

WEBSITE:

A charrette website can be enormously helpful as a pre-charrette educational tool. Publicize the site heavily leading up to the charrette. Once the charrette begins, images can be posted several times a day to keep everyone updated with the progress of the event. Another benefit of the website is the ability to link to an enormous quantity of other web-based resources, including other appropriate local sites run by members of both the public and the private sector.

CHARRETTE NEWSPAPER: Consider the use of a tabloid-format newspaper. You can do either a pre-charrette paper to publicize the event, a post-charrette paper to summarize the event, or both. Charrette papers can be included as an insert in the local paper, handed out at the charrette itself, or distributed in many other obvious and/or creative ways. The Town Paper has grown up around traditional town planning, and is very adept at doing charrette papers quickly and at low cost. Their infrastructure could be just as useful putting out charrette papers that have nothing to do with town planning.

- CONVENTIONAL NEWSPAPER: Consider some conventional advertisement, unless you can get significant editorial coverage. Editorial coverage is obviously better on two counts: it carries the impression of approval by the paper, plus it's free.
- FLYERS & POSTERS: These are two of the oldest forms of advertisement. They're still around because they work fairly well and are relatively inexpensive. Consider posting them in local businesses, on community bulletin boards and in apartment lobbies.
- APPEARANCES: Consider personal appearances at churches, schools, fraternal organizations, business organizations and at meetings of activist groups. Offer yourself for interviews to local television stations.
- PRESS RELEASES: Finally, do press releases to every media outlet of any sort in the county.

ACCOMMODATIONS

There are various thoughts on this. Some firms simply select the cheapest hotels available. Others are strongly of the opinion that the cheapest acceptable hotel should be something mid-range. Team members don't need to feel that they are being treated luxuriously, but they should feel that they are being treated as the professionals that they are. And the room should be comfortable enough that when they return at the end of a long day, they get good-quality rest. We have found repeatedly that local inns are often very little more expensive than the local mid-range hotels. In such cases, the inns are reserved without question. And in any case, sleep one person per room. The limited amount of rest that team members get should not be interrupted by another team member's conflicting sleep schedule.

FOOD

Lunches are always catered to the studio, and should generally be light, low-fat affairs so that people are not bogged down in the afternoons. Make sure that a person can make a meal out of the low-carb offerings, since several people on a charrette team are usually doing a low-carb diet. Also, make sure that vegetarians have selections to choose from.

SNACKS

Provide light snacks available at all times. A selection of high-protein snacks such as nuts and beef jerky are also recommended for the low-carb people. Provide a hefty supply of chewing gum, which is handy for meetings held after a lunch that includes garlic or onions. Provide bottled water and coffee (both varieties) at the snack table.

FACILITIES

Specific facility requirements should be tailored to the specific sort of charrette. The list is lengthy and specific (including things like padded, not metal, folding chairs for all team members since they'll be sitting there for long hours). It is included elsewhere on the Tool Foundry.