Charrette

A Charrette is an intensive participatory planning process used to collaboratively develop ideas, visions, and design concepts for specific places or neighbourhoods. In an open and creative environment, residents, planning professionals, public authorities, and other stakeholders work together to create spatial concepts and planning proposals.

Participation Depth	Have a say
Project Phase	Concept Development
Goals	Developing Ideas
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 Day - 1 Week, Several Weeks, Several Months
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Organised Actors
Group Size	Medium Group up to 30, Large Group from 30
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of a Charrette is to collaboratively develop concrete ideas and spatial solutions for a planning area together with residents, planning professionals, public authorities, and policymakers. Different perspectives, needs, and interests are identified early in the process and directly integrated into planning. Through its open and transparent approach, the method creates a shared understanding of local challenges as well as future opportunities and potential developments. At the same time, it encourages dialogue among participants and increases transparency about how planning decisions are developed.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the objectives and framework
Begin by clarifying:

- What is to be planned or designed?
- Which questions remain open?
- Which decisions can still be influenced?
- Which stakeholders need to be involved?

Also determine:

- the project timeline

- the location
- roles and responsibilities
- communication channels

Important:

Participants should understand from the outset what opportunities for meaningful participation and influence are actually available.

2. Explore the planning area
Before the Charrette begins, the planning area should be explored together.

Suitable activities include:

- neighbourhood walks
- guided site tours
- bicycle tours
- site visits

Pay particular attention to:

- identifying problematic locations
- recognising the area's strengths
- collecting initial impressions

Helpful guiding questions include:

- Where do people enjoy spending time?
- Where do conflicts arise?
- Which places or facilities are missing?
- Which routes or connections do not function well?

3. Conduct interviews and background research
During the preparation phase, relevant information should be collected.

This may include:

- conversations with local residents
- interviews with planning professionals and other experts
- discussions with community groups and local organisations
- analysis of existing plans and planning documents
- public communication and outreach activities

Important:

Make every effort to include a broad range of perspectives.

4. Establish the Charrette Core Team
A small core team supports and coordinates the entire process.

It typically consists of:

- planning professionals
- facilitators
- representatives of the public administration
- the organising team
- subject-matter experts

The core team is responsible for:

- overseeing the overall process
- structuring the collaborative work
- preparing information and materials
- documenting interim results

5. Organise Mini-Charrettes or Pre-Events
Before the main Charrette begins, smaller preparatory events can be organised.

These events can be used to:

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provide background information

- answer participants' questions
- collect initial ideas
- encourage people to take part in the main process

These activities make it easier for participants to engage in the intensive collaborative phase that follows.

Execution

1. Opening and Introduction

At the beginning of the Charrette, participants receive an introduction to the process.

The following aspects are presented:

- the objectives of the Charrette
- the overall process and schedule
- the planning area
- the ground rules for collaboration

The facilitation team also explains:

- how the collaborative work will be organised
- how ideas and outcomes will be documented
- how planning decisions will be developed throughout the process

Important:

All participants should understand that the planning process is open-ended and that ideas and proposals may evolve as discussions progress.

2. Working at Thematic Tables

The Charrette is typically organised around several thematic workstations.

Possible topics include:

- mobility
- green spaces

- housing
- quality of public spaces
- safety
- use of public space

Each table is facilitated and documented. The work usually develops through several stages.

Table 1: Identifying Needs and Challenges

Participants discuss questions such as:

- What works well?
- Where are the main challenges?
- What needs should be addressed?

Helpful tools include:

- sketches
- photographs
- notes made directly on maps and plans

Table 2: Integrating Professional Perspectives

Planning professionals and subject-matter experts contribute:

- technical expertise
- legal and regulatory requirements
- planning constraints and opportunities
- examples from comparable projects

Important:

Professional expertise should enrich the discussion without dominating it.

Table 3: Developing Solutions and Design Concepts

The collected ideas are then developed into more concrete proposals.

Possible working methods include:

- drawings
- sketches
- physical models
- direct annotations on maps and plans

Participants discuss questions such as:

- What is realistically achievable?
- Which alternative solutions are possible?
- What would be the potential impacts of each proposal?

3. Public Working Phase
A defining feature of a Charrette is its open and transparent working process.

Throughout the event:

- interim results are displayed publicly
- visitors can join the process at any time
- discussions remain open and visible
- additional ideas can continuously be added

This creates a transparent planning process and encourages ongoing participation.

4. Daily Progress Presentations
At the end of each day, interim results are presented to all participants.

These sessions provide an opportunity to:

- collect feedback
- identify emerging conflicts
- refine and improve ideas

In this way, the planning proposals evolve step by step throughout the Charrette.

5. Closing Forum
At the end of the process, the completed plan or master plan is presented to the public.

The presentation explains:

- how the proposals were developed
- which ideas have been incorporated
- which questions remain unresolved

Participants are invited to:

- provide feedback
- identify priorities
- suggest final revisions

Evaluation

1. Prepare the Results
The outcomes are:

- documented
- visualised
- summarised

They may be presented as:

- a report
- a planning document
- conceptual sketches
- a presentation

2. Submit the Results to Decision-Makers
The outcomes are then shared with:

- political decision-makers

- the public administration
- planning professionals

These stakeholders use the results as a basis for further planning and decision-making.

It is important to communicate transparently how the process will continue after the Charrette.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

designing or redeveloping a neighbourhood, district, or public space

multiple interests and perspectives need to be brought together

concrete spatial solutions are to be developed

participation should take place openly and visibly

residents, policymakers, public authorities, and planning professionals are expected to work collaboratively

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

results are needed within a very short timeframe

there is insufficient time or staff for preparation

there is no genuine scope for influencing decisions

key decisions have already been made

there is little openness to exploring different ideas

TIPS

- Whenever possible, work directly within the planning area.
- Visible and transparent working processes strengthen trust and encourage participation.
- Visualise ideas early and present them in an accessible way.
- Allow sufficient time for discussion, feedback, and revision.
- The facilitation team should have experience in both participatory processes and spatial planning.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- short-term projects with limited time
- projects without meaningful scope for design or planning decisions
- processes with very limited staff or financial resources

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/charette