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To cite this article: Mattijs Van Maasakkers & Jeelson Oh (2020): Where Should We Have the Meeting?, Journal of the American Planning Association

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2019.1685904>

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 Published online: 27 Feb 2020.

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ABSTRACT

Problem, research strategy, and findings: Scholars and practitioners in the fields of planning, public participation, and consensus building have devised a variety of techniques for participatory decision making. Despite the ever-growing literatures on public participation, consensus building, and deliberative democracy, few scholars have studied perhaps the most elemental consideration in designing participatory processes: how to create physical environments for productive interactions and conversations. In this study, we address that gap in the scholarship on participatory decision making by answering two questions: What are planners seeking to achieve when creating venues for engagement, participation, or collaboration? What are the tools at their disposal to do so? We interviewed practitioners with significant experience in the facilitation of planning processes, selected at random from the National Roster of Environmental Conflict Resolution Professionals, and developed a set of objectives and considerations for creating effective venues for participation and collaboration in planning. Based on our analysis, we find that *venue creation* involves three key dimensions: determining the appropriate venue-related process objectives, selecting a location, and arranging the chosen space.

Takeaway for practice: Combining insights from existing guidance in handbooks and reports with the findings from our interviews, we developed the Venue Creation Tool to support more informed discussions and choices related to venues for participation and collaboration in planning.

Keywords: citizen engagement, consensus building, public participation, process, space

Most planners organize a lot of meetings (Dalton, 2007). Whether to gather public input on a comprehensive plan or to discuss a new site plan with a few key stakeholders, planners are often involved in and responsible for organizing gatherings in which residents, city officials, developers, consultants, and advocates engage them and each other (Healey, 1992). Guidance on public participation and collaboration in policymaking and planning frequently mentions the importance of location and seating arrangement when organizing meetings (see Bryson, Quick, Slotterback, & Crosby, 2013; Cogan, 2000; Creighton, 2005; Garcia, Garfinkel-Castro, & Pfeiffer, 2019; Herd, 2019; Susskind, McKernan, & Thomas-Larmer, 1999). However, despite this apparent significance, the venues in which meetings take place are rarely the primary subject of detailed analyses of participatory processes and consensus-building efforts in the planning literature. Some analyses of planning processes in scholarly publications about participation and collaboration include brief references to meeting locations (see Beard & Sarmiento, 2014) or seating arrangement (see Healey & Hillier, 1996). Even these

brief descriptions suggest the venues in which planning meetings take place are significant.

In this study we investigate why and how venues for participation and collaboration in planning are created. We define *venue creation* as the intentional selection and arrangement of spaces in which meetings between public officials and nongovernmental actors occur. We use our semistructured interviews with 13 experienced facilitators and planners to develop answers to the following questions: What are the objectives that planners seek to incorporate when creating (often temporary) venues where participation or collaboration in planning occurs? How do planners select the locations and specific buildings or rooms in which such meetings take place? What kinds of seating arrangements are used, and what other decisions are made about variable elements like lighting or furniture? Based on our findings, we developed the Venue Creation Tool (VCT) to help practitioners and analysts choose and assess venues for collaborative and participatory planning meetings.

Despite limited scholarship on this topic, these questions are not new to planning practice. In the next section we describe relevant scholarship (Christiansen,

2015; Forester, 2018; Hajer, 2005) and connect it to the practice-oriented guidance available, like handbooks (Cogan, 2000; Creighton, 2005; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015; Susskind et al., 1999) and relevant recent Planning Advisory Service reports (Garcia et al., 2019; Herd, 2019). We focus on guidance related to planning meetings that allows for some discretion in location selection. This means the meeting venues at the heart of our study are generally related to temporary planning processes, like preparing comprehensive plans, rather than to more routine interactions like monthly zoning board meetings. Following this overview of existing scholarship and practical guidance, we describe how and why we gathered evidence by interviewing experienced facilitators and planners. Our findings consist of a set of key objectives, selection criteria, and arrangement options for public meetings and processes, summarized in the VCT. In the final section of this study we discuss further implications for planning scholarship and practice from these findings.

Existing Theories and Guidance Related to Venue Creation

Decisions about where to organize a meeting and how to arrange the seating in the room are related to the type of interaction the organizer seeks to achieve. Despite the limited scholarship on this topic, there are at least three perspectives available in the planning literature on public participation and consensus building that seek to make sense of the connection(s) between the venue in which a meeting is held and the interactions that take place within it. These perspectives attribute different levels and types of influence to the meeting's organizer in creating venues that shape particular behaviors or interactions.

The first perspective is that the participants' sense of the type of meeting they are attending is likely to inform their behavior: "We use metaphors, more profoundly, if subtly, to shape worlds: inviting you to a 'study group', or to a 'debate', we shape your expectations of 'what you're getting into', politically, ethically, interactively" (Forester, 2018, p. 598). This idea of the significance of the metaphorical understanding of the type of meeting can be extended to the physical venue in which the meeting takes place. For example, creating a seating arrangement based on numerous small round tables versus one in which two rows of seats face each other in front of an audience contributes to our understanding of whether we are attending a study group or debate.

A second perspective is based on "aesthetics in public engagement," defined as "the atmospheric qualities of experiences, how bodies are engaged, the level

of formality, and range of affective performance" (Christiansen, 2015, p. 457). This way of making sense of the interactions between the type of meeting and the level and forms of interaction between participants extends beyond metaphors like *study group* or *debate*. The aesthetic perspective suggests that planners incorporate a broad range of interaction styles and formats that affect the participants' physical and psychological experiences when organizing a public meeting.

The third relevant perspective on the interaction between meeting venue and forms of interaction comes from an article about a regional planning process in The Netherlands. Based on this case study, Hajer (2005) highlights the important and often nuanced relationships between a meeting venue, its arrangement, and the behavior(s) various participants exhibit (or are expected to exhibit). He introduces an analytical framework to make sense of these relationships using dramaturgical terms:

First, scripting refers to those efforts to create a setting by determining the characters in the play and to provide cues for appropriate behavior. Second, staging refers to the deliberate organization of an interaction, drawing on existing symbols and the invention of new ones as well as on the distinction between active players and (presumably passive) audiences. Third, setting is the physical situation in which the interaction takes place and can include the artifacts that are brought to the situation. (Hajer, 2005, p. 631)

This analysis suggests that planners can exert significant influence on participation and collaboration processes through venue creation. Scripting and staging are intentional and strategic activities that directly inform the creation of the physical situation or setting, which ultimately produces what Hajer (2005) refers to as the "performance."

These three perspectives connect venue creation to the nature and quality of public participation and collaboration in planning processes in different ways, suggesting different levels and types of influence a planner might exert through venue creation. This raises at least two important empirical questions: First, what are the objectives planners are seeking to achieve when creating venues for engagement, participation, or collaboration? The second question emerging from these perspectives is about the tools at their disposal to achieve particular objectives: What can planners actually do in practice to bring these metaphors to life, affect atmospheric qualities, or create a setting?

The existing practical guidance on organizing meetings for planners suggests some ways to answer these questions, focusing on three categories that planners have to consider. The first is the stipulation of

desired dynamics and outcomes associated with a specific meeting or process, which we refer to as the *venue-related process objectives*. These include neutrality (Creighton, 2005; Susskind et al., 1999), acceptability (Cogan, 2000), fairness (Garcia et al., 2019), convenience (Cogan, 2000; Creighton, 2005), comfort (Halvorsen, 2001; Susskind et al., 1999), a welcoming atmosphere (Cogan, 2000; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015), a non-intimidating environment (Gill, 1996), and a sense of safety (Forester, 2009).

Following from the determination of the appropriate (combination of) objectives for a specific meeting, the creation of the “setting” relates to a second category of considerations about the meeting location. We call this second category of practical choices *venue selection*. This includes pragmatic considerations like room size, presence of audiovisual equipment, and cost (Cogan, 2000; Herd, 2019). The third category of choices described in much of the practical guidance relates to aspects that can be altered or added once a specific location has been selected. We refer to this set of decisions as *venue arrangement*. Venue arrangement choices include how to organize the chairs and table(s) and manage the lighting, temperature, and audiovisual systems (Cogan, 2000; Herd, 2019; Schwarz, 1994).

Some empirical evidence suggests the connections between venue-relevant process objectives and the practical choices associated with venue location and arrangement are both complex and significant. A seating arrangement that seems neutral to one group of participants can be problematic for others: “For example, when business people meet residents’ groups in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, they do not realize that a boardroom layout is alien and intimidating to many” (Healey, 1997, p. 85). The translation of these broad and somewhat abstract objectives to practical considerations that inform the selection and arrangement of an actual venue quickly raises long-standing but difficult questions about neutrality and fairness in collaborative planning and dispute resolution (Mayer, 2011).

In practice, public and stakeholder meetings in any given planning process frequently occur in multiple venues because different types of interaction can be required in different phases: “Not only may it be helpful to encourage discussion in several ‘institutional places’ at the early stages of a strategic planning exercise (such as Council Chambers, business clubs, community halls, schools, radio phone-ins). The arenas may change in nature as discussion proceeds” (Healey, 1997, pp. 271–272). Whereas the location of one meeting might be primarily informed by an effort to achieve neutrality, another meeting might be intended to maximize a perception of fairness.

These three types of considerations—venue-relevant process objectives, venue selection, and venue arrangement—are not always described or prescribed in this order because they are deeply interrelated (Table 1 summarizes the commonly described venue-related process objectives, selection, and arrangement considerations, as well as their sources). The available practical guidance begins to suggest how planners might enact the metaphors, aesthetics, and settings that analysts observe. But how does this occur in practice? How can we gather evidence about the ways in which planners actually make decisions about venues for collaboration and participation and whether the venue relates to the dynamics and outcomes of meetings and processes?

Learning From Facilitative Leaders

We investigate venue creation decision making by interviewing 13 experienced practitioners (see Technical Appendix A). The idea of using experiences from practice to inform models and tools is not new in planning (Forester, 1982; Healey, 1992; Hoch, 1994; Schon, 1982). In the context of communicative planning, professionals’ experiences and insights are particularly relevant (Ozawa & Seltzer, 1999), especially because we are focusing on practical judgments (Forester, 1993, 2012) such as translating abstract objectives like neutrality to the pragmatics of selecting meeting locations and rooms.

We focused on professionals with expertise in facilitation and mediation. Planning scholar John Forester argues that practitioners “might learn from the ways mediators have wrestled with problems of representing parties, tapping expertise, enabling understanding of others and issues, and far more” (Forester, 2013, p. 7). As our findings indicate, all of the mediators we interviewed consider the creation of venues an important part of their role, despite its absence from Forester’s description of their particular types of expertise. The practitioners describe a direct relationship between their expertise in dealing with problems of representation, expertise, and mutual understanding and the venue creation process. A second reason to focus on professional facilitators and mediators is because the need and opportunity to select and arrange a particular (set of) venues is mostly associated with “large-scale periodic planning tasks such as comprehensive plan updates,” for which consultants are typically brought in (Loh & Norton, 2013, p. 145; Stapper, Van Der Veen, & Janssen-Jansen, 2020). By interviewing professionals whose work mainly consists of facilitating and mediating collaborative planning processes, we were able to learn from individuals who have been responsible for organizing hundreds of meetings in locations around the country.

Table 1. Existing venue creation guidance.

		Key questions	Relevant literature
Venue-related objectives			
Matching meeting type	What kind of space is appropriate for the particular type and stage of a given process?		Healey, 1997, pp. 271–272
Convenience	Is the venue easily accessible? Is there parking and public transit?		Cogan, 2000, p. 45; Creighton, 2005, p. 176
Comfort	Would the participants be psychologically as well as physically comfortable in the venue?		Halvorsen, 2001, p. 179
Welcoming	How can the facilitator/mediator create a convivial atmosphere?		Cogan, 2000, p. 48; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015, p. 67
Nonintimidating	Is the setting nonintimidating, with a social element to the meeting as well?		Gill, 1996, p. 636
Safety	How can the facilitator/mediator create “safe spaces” in various forms of deliberative sessions? Small group conversation, informal gathering, or meals?		Forester, 2009, p. 32
Neutrality	What is a neutral location?		Creighton, 2005, p. 177; Straus, 1999, p. 304
Acceptability	Are the location, time, and date acceptable to most of the participants?		Cogan, 2000, p. 45
Fairness	Is the venue particularly convenient and comfortable for disadvantaged communities?		Garcia et al., 2019, p. 70
Venue selection			
Size	Is the size of the venue suitable for the goal and the number of people expected for the meeting? Does the venue allow for certain flexibility in accommodating “overflow crowds”?		Cogan, 2000, p. 45; Herd, 2019, p. 51 Cogan, 2000, p. 49; Herd, 2019, p. 50
Presence of audiovisual equipment	What technology and room amenities are available in the venue? Audiovisual, WiFi, tables and chairs?		Cogan, 2000, p. 45; Herd, 2019, p. 51
Cost	Are there costs associated with using the venue? Rental fee, potential costs associated with renting chairs and tables?		Cogan, 2000, p. 45; Herd, 2019, p. 51
Venue arrangement			
Seating arrangement	Is the distance between presenters and the audience as well as among participants optimal for different kinds of activities?		Cogan, 2000, p. 49; Herd, 2019, pp. 52–53
Lighting	Is the lighting adequate for the type and purpose of the meeting? Is it dimmable?		Cogan, 2000, p. 49; Herd, 2019, pp. 52–53; Straus, 1999, p. 304
Temperature	Is the temperature comfortable for most of the participants?		Herd, 2019, pp. 52–53
Audiovisual system	Are there good acoustics and sightlines to ensure people are seen and heard?		Cogan, 2000, p. 49; Herd, 2019, pp. 52–53

We identified potential respondents from the National Roster of Environmental Conflict Resolution Professionals, which was created and is maintained by the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution. Established by the U.S. Congress in 1992, this organization provides assessment, mediation, training, and other related services (Alexander & O’Leary, 2013). Environmental mediators are particularly relevant to planning because they not only support processes by “scheduling, chairing, and recessing meetings; arranging joint and separate sessions; [and] setting the location for meetings” (Susskind & Ozawa, 1984, p. 13) but they also need to incorporate complex technical information

(Susskind & Ozawa, 1984) and associated artifacts like large maps (projected or physical) and/or models into the spaces in which meetings are held. Of our 13 respondents, 4 have either an undergraduate or graduate degree in planning, and 1 of those 4 is an active member of the AICP.

Among the 300 names on the national roster, we selected potential respondents randomly to avoid selection bias related to training or geographic location. In one case, we interviewed a colleague of a randomly selected respondent because we were told her experience would be more relevant to our research goals. We conducted semistructured phone interviews with each

of the respondents; phone interviews were between 45 and 90 min. We asked them to describe both their general process for venue creation and one or two specific cases in more detail to generate the kinds of “practice stories” (Forester, 1993) that allowed us detailed insight into their approach (see [Technical Appendix B](#)).

In addition to these interviews, we gathered information from the practitioners about processes and tools. Several of the respondents have published detailed accounts of some of their work (see Bingham, 1986; Carpenter & Kennedy, 1988; McCreary, Gamman, & Brooks, 2001) and others feature in descriptions of collaborative processes (Cohen, 2013). In addition to these descriptions, we requested and received documents related to venue creation from several respondents, such as checklists and process maps. These documents provided a better understanding of the specific contexts in which venue creation decisions were made and also gave insight into issues of practical importance, like how decisions such as the necessary number of microphones are made in a routine fashion (see [Technical Appendix C](#) for a list of these supplemental documents provided by the respondents).

Together, the interviews, publicly available descriptions of processes, and professional documents provided by the respondents allow us to understand a broad range of objectives and considerations used by experienced facilitators and mediators. Based on this understanding, we present the VCT, which summarizes the objectives, location, and arrangement considerations. We include both the available guidance and the findings from our research to provide an overview of the ways in which planners use venue creation to achieve particular process objectives. By creating the VCT, we hope to contribute to enrich the analysis of the links between venue creation and public participation and collaboration in planning, whether those connections are understood as metaphorical, aesthetic, or dramaturgical. Simultaneously, we seek to provide practitioners with an overview of potential objectives and relevant considerations.

Venue Creation: Objectives, Locations, and Arrangements

Our analysis of facilitators’ experiences highlights the complex judgments and integrated nature of the venue creation process. We describe three categories of insights in the following sections. The first is that experienced facilitators constantly seek to integrate broader objectives like neutrality, fairness, or flexibility into practical decisions regarding venues. Which of the objectives are more significant can vary during a particular process and relates to the facilitators’ assessment of

power imbalances and (potential for) escalating tensions during the process. The second key insight is that venue selection considerations play an important role in the design of participatory processes. Respondents mentioned spending significant amounts of time on venue selection by discussing possible venues with multiple stakeholders, researching the history of specific venues, and visiting them in person. The third category of insights relates to the venue arrangement considerations. Here, the facilitators consistently emphasized creating spaces that allow for direct interactions between participants, informality, and flexibility.

Objectives

The practitioners’ accounts expand upon the existing guidance on venue creation in three ways. First, they try to enhance the overall process and its legitimacy by creating venues that transform substantive dynamics and barriers, from (re-)framing relevant issues to producing specific types of interactions. Second, informality is a key objective. Third, several—but not all—facilitators say a venue does not have to be “neutral,” especially in processes where significant power differences exist.

Several facilitators suggest they are doing more than “fitting the forum to the fuss” (Sander & Goldberg, 1994; Susskind, Gordon, & Zaerpoor, 2018). They deliberately try to affect the outcome(s) of a meeting through venue creation. One example of deliberate venue creation in an effort to shape—or in this case transform—participants’ deliberations is through a site visit.

When we feel people are trapped by abstract ideas about the problems they face, we try to change the context by organizing a field trip. It helps to take the group to the field, meet with the farmers, and see the challenges on the ground. Changing this external context reframes their thinking. (J. Geurts, policy facilitator, Keystone Policy Center, October 4, 2018)

Although a field trip might not be viable for many types of planning processes and specific meeting formats, several practitioners make a similar argument. They use venue creation to change participants’ expectations about the type of meeting they are attending (“Get them out of their routine—often the conference rooms in government buildings—into a more retreat-like space”; P. Tallarico, president, Enventive Consulting, June 25, 2018) based on a similar logic: “That can be one way to kind of get people out and maybe get them a little new perspective on the work you are trying to do” (P. Tallarico, June 25, 2018).

Using uncommon venues during participatory planning processes is connected to the second takeaway from many respondents, namely, an emphasis on

encouraging informal interactions and events. The value of informal opportunities for participation in planning processes, through activities as diverse as walking tours and flea markets (Hou & Kinoshita, 2007) or block parties (Christiansen, 2015), has been recognized previously (Innes, Connick, & Booher, 2007). Christiansen (2015) points to highly successful informal events that eventually gave way to more conventional (and formal) venues, like an open house in a former library. The shift resulted in a decline in participation and a narrowing of the issues considered. One experienced practitioner observed how shifting to more informal interactions through seating arrangement produces specific behaviors: "It simply changes the dynamic when you're sitting there, basically knee-to-knee with people, or 4 to 5 feet away from them. People's behavior tends to change" (J. Godec, principal, The Participation Company, November 14, 2017). Highly informal venues like pop-up meetings (Kaufman, 2015) and mobile engagement stations (Kaufman, 2016) are familiar to many practitioners, but these interviews suggest that informality is an objective applied to more conventional processes and meetings as well.

Deliberately shaping expectations of what participants are getting into, particularly by creating relatively informal venues for participation and collaboration, aligns with several of the objectives in the existing guidance on venue creation: Venues need to be welcoming and fair and provide comfort and convenience. However, the third finding related to venue creation objectives found in the existing guidance points to a potential tension that can emerge between neutral venues and highly informal venues or those selected to encourage or empower specific communities or groups. Several respondents argued against an emphasis on neutrality in venue creation, especially in the context of processes that deal with significant power differences: "I am consistent about going to look at a space and determining who is most vulnerable and what space is going to allow them to engage most effectively" (C. M. Gyovai, principal, Design + Dialogue Associates, September 28, 2018). Similarly, one respondent provides a brief example:

I did a housing dispute in Houston [TX] once and people said that people never come to our housing project. And we could understand that, but if you're going to be talking about that we are going to need people to see what that is really like. That's about fairness. Neutrality may not even be an appropriate word there. (S. Carpenter, founding director, Program for Community Problem Solving, January 10, 2018)

Neutrality, when understood as a strictly equal treatment of all potential participants or communities, is not the objective these facilitators seek to apply in such

cases, although several facilitators do mention that when tensions are escalating about (elements of) a planning process, they do make sure the venue is at least acceptable to representatives of key constituencies.

These findings highlight how practitioners creatively apply and prioritize familiar objectives when selecting and arranging venues. Here, too, we find attention to power imbalance(s) and opportunities for subtle influences on planning processes.

Venue Selection

The objectives respondents considered relate directly to venue selection. A planner translates objectives like neutrality and convenience into choices about ease of access by transit, availability of parking, and proximity to a site, area, or community of interest. Considerations like rental cost, seating capacity, and the presence of necessary furniture and technical infrastructure(s) like wireless internet, a sound system, and a projector also factor into the choice for a specific location. Some differences between the existing guidance and the practices reported by the professional facilitators do emerge, namely a) a focus on the history of the venue, b) the presence of windows in a meeting venue, and c) the absence of overt security infrastructures, like metal detectors, sign-in procedures, and entry vestibules.

Several practitioners point to the relevance of the activities and events that regularly occur at a venue or even singular incidents that have taken place. They indicate it is useful to conduct research on the social history and role within a community of potential venues, including simply asking community members or other potential participants about its reputation and past. This can inform facilitators of the specific status of a venue as a space where community members gather to discuss important issues, like a popular music venue that can effectively serve as a community center (Chapple & Jackson, 2010).

Investigating the history and social significance of specific venues can yield potential locations that might otherwise be overlooked but can also provide information about why to avoid certain locations. One practitioner describes the risk of ignoring this consideration:

The meeting room we ended up using happened to be the location where three people were shot and killed, about two years prior at an HOA [homeowners association] meeting. When I walked into the room, frankly, I did not know the venue until we got there and wasn't aware of this. (J. Godec, November 14, 2017)

The interviewee went on to describe the effect on the dynamics in the meeting: "There was a lot of bad

karma that day. It was just a tough place” (J. Godec, November 14, 2017). Understanding the social history and role(s) of a specific location can be an important consideration for the practitioners we interviewed. In practice, this requires that planners, especially those who are relatively unfamiliar with a specific community, actively communicate with residents, representatives, or other stakeholders about the particular locations for a specific meeting or event.

An area of some disagreement, both among the practitioners we interviewed and within the existing guidance, relates to the presence of windows. Most of the practitioners express a strong preference for natural light in a meeting venue. Several point to the importance of views to an outside space, to allow for some reflection and a tangible connection to the world outside of the meeting location, especially for longer meetings. This contrasts with some existing guidance, which calls for “few or no distractions, such as scenic views or reflecting windows” (Cogan, 2000, p. 49).

As with all venue creation objectives and considerations, the specifics of the type of meeting a planner might organize will inform which considerations might prevail. One facilitator considers the use of natural light a strategic action related to the preferred type of dynamics during a specific meeting:

Lighting influences how you craft the agenda. If there are portions that are very PowerPoint heavy and there are portions that don't need it, you might take advantage of the fact that the room you use has a really nice view. You can open up the windows to shed some natural light at the time of the day when everyone is getting tired. (J. Geurts, October 4, 2018)

The drawback associated with windows here is not the potential for distraction but rather the inability to see projections. These kinds of drawbacks are only relevant in specific types of meetings, but the role of possible distractions in a meeting venue, not only visual but also digital, is connected to differing ideas about the ways in which the “outside” is allowed entry into planning meetings. Whereas some facilitators express a desire to control such influences, even going so far as to speculate about the use of cell phone signal-blocking rooms, others express a desire to connect to events and views of the outside in as many ways as possible, from fast and public wireless internet to picture windows. Again, some practitioners use these considerations strategically:

The more intimate and closed the space is, the more likely that folks are to accomplish something but the less likely they will be able to think outside of the box. So, alternating between open and closed spaces can be

effective, as long as you are aware of the effect of a room's atmosphere on people's ability to think and work. (J. Geurts, October 4, 2018)

The consideration of whether, how, and how much intervention from outside of the venue to allow in and whether or not the facilitator can be in control of these interactions plays a role for many of the facilitators we interviewed. They make decisions about the extent to which they want to create a venue where the attendees focus on creating connections among themselves and develop trust and rapport inside of the venue or, alternatively, venues that are more easily understood as a town square that participants briefly pass through, bringing in and taking out ideas, interests, or opinions.

This relates to the third consideration for venue selection by experienced facilitators and mediators beyond those frequently found in the existing guidance: the presence of security infrastructure, mainly metal detectors and secure vestibules. These elements, increasingly common in government buildings and schools in the United States, present tangible barriers to entering a venue. This consideration relates to the broader objectives of seeking to create welcoming and friendly venues for participation and collaboration in planning. One practitioner even mentioned that the presence of metal detectors to enter a different section of the building in which a meeting was being held made certain participants more hesitant to attend or participate in a series of meetings (R. Kennedy, director of interpretation & planning, 106 Group, June 6, 2019).

Because it is unlikely that a venue will meet all of the preferences and criteria expressed by facilitators and the participants in planning meetings, all respondents and the existing guidance emphasize the importance of modifying the existing venue in ways that enhance the meeting (see Table 2).

Venue Arrangement

The considerations most frequently expressed in the existing guidance relate to seating configuration (the flexibility to change it or increase the number of seats as needed before or during a meeting), climate control, and the presence and management of audiovisual equipment like microphones and one or more projectors or screens and recording devices like cameras (see Table 1). The considerations practitioners stress include the ability to implement particular seating arrangements, the importance of welcoming or greeting participants, and the availability of food and refreshments.

The practitioners uniformly express a strong preference for seating arrangements that enable direct interaction and eye contact between the participants and the facilitator or presenter(s). Depending on the number

Table 2. Venue creation tool.

Key questions		Relevant considerations		Examples
Venue-related objectives				
Credibility and legitimacy	Do the elected officials, staff members, and (likely) participants underwrite the need for a process? Do they trust the ability and authority of relevant decision makers and facilitators?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directly discuss potential venue(s) with the stakeholders Is there a history of refusing to acknowledge or implement the outcomes of earlier processes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrange a field trip to the site of interest Use uncommon venues outside the routine (e.g., the conference rooms in government buildings) for a more retreat-like space 	
Informality	How familiar are the elected and appointed officials, staff members, and likely participants with each other? Will they be comfortable interacting with each other during the meeting?	Ask representatives and individuals about their familiarity with each other and overall comfort level regarding interactions in the public sphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arrange walking tours, flea markets, and block parties Incorporate coffee breaks, meals, and informal gatherings into the meeting agenda 	
Welcoming	Are some (potential) participants likely to be (relatively) new to participating in planning and/or conversations in the public sphere?	Pay attention to the experience of arriving and entering the venue	Personally welcome and greet the participants as they enter the venue	
Fairness	Are there significant and/or long-standing power imbalances? Might these present obstacles to engaging particular communities?	Reach out to the representatives of the particular groups and ask them whether there are specific processes through which they might engage meaningfully with relevant issues	Try to “come to the communities” as opposed to “have them come to government offices or corporate headquarters”	
Neutrality	Is there significant potential for escalation among the participants, given existing community relations?	Consult with stakeholders and ask what types of venues would be acceptable to representatives of relevant constituencies	If the geographic scope of a project spans a large area, suggest multiple options (e.g., deciding on one central location, rotating venues) with stakeholders	
Venue selection				
Convenience of access	Is the venue easily accessible?	How can planners ensure that no group is discouraged from participating due to difficulty of physically accessing the venue?	Check that the venue meets ADA standards, that there are public transit stops nearby, and/or that parking is available	
Proximity to the community or to the site of interest	How close is the venue to the key communities and/or locations related to the substance of the process?	Is it possible to select a central location that all the stakeholders agree upon, or is it preferable to choose multiple locations?	Community centers, public libraries, a private venue near the site of interest	
Costs	Is there a budget dedicated to renting a space? If not, is there a monetary cost associated with using the venue?	Though public buildings are often freely available, these spaces can prove intimidating and inhospitable to some individuals and communities	Privately owned and unusual venues like stores or restaurants might be available at low or no cost	
Size	Is the seating capacity suitable for the goal and the number of people expected for the meeting?	Consider looking for a venue that allows for certain flexibility in case of “overflow crowds”	Check the availability of extra chairs or adjacent rooms	

Presence of necessary furniture and technical infrastructure(s)	What technology and room amenities are necessary given the meeting size, format, and requirements?	If a venue is particularly well suited for other reasons, consider renting or bringing technology like projectors	Check if the AV, WiFi, and projector are working properly; check whether chairs and tables are suitable
History	What sorts of events have taken place in this venue in the past?	Conduct research on the history and social significance of potential venues	Ask community members or other potential participants about the venue's reputation and past
Presence of windows	How many windows are in the venue, and how can natural light be controlled?	Is it possible to quickly change the lighting conditions or the meeting schedule to foster creativity, energy, and tangible connection to the world outside without distracting participants unnecessarily?	Adjust timing of certain activities during the meeting; use shades
Absence of overt security infrastructures	Are there overt security infrastructures such as metal detectors or security vestibules?	Is it possible to create a welcoming venue that avoids intimidating potential participants without ignoring relevant safety concerns?	Select venues with social elements that are more welcoming and friendly
Venue arrangement			
Seating arrangement	Does the seating arrangement enable direct interaction and eye contact between the participants?	How can you arrange the seats so people can interact directly while retaining some personal space for each participant?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sit around one big table; with larger groups, use horseshoe-shaped arrangement • For breakout sessions, keep enough distance between tables so that the small groups can have separate conversations
Presence of a welcoming or greeting station	How can the facilitator/mediator create a welcoming atmosphere?	Carefully plan the arrival sequence to create a warm and welcoming experience as the participants enter the space	Welcome participants personally or delegate someone (greeter) to that task; place printed materials and/or a sign-in sheet on a table and beverage station at the entrance
Availability of food and refreshments	When and how should food and refreshments be served?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide appropriate food and beverages • Create opportunities for informal interactions through "food sharing" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring food relevant to that community; consider sourcing it from local vendors • Boxed lunches may be more efficient, but serve-yourself style can be conducive to opening up and accepting "the other"

Note: ADA = Americans with Disabilities Act.

of participants and specific goals of a meeting, this can be accomplished by multiple smaller tables with groups of people sitting around them, a single horseshoe-shaped arrangement, or multiple activity stations. But even in large groups, with a few people presenting or on a panel, some facilitators still find ways to translate objectives like comfort and nonintimidation to specific seating arrangements:

I focus on making sure that chairs are placed in ways that people have to look at each other at least to some degree. That means that chairs are angled. That means that people aren't simply looking at the bureaucrats up on the stage, for instance. Put them down at the same level as the people they are going to be talking with, for instance. Try to create a situation that looks less, and feels less, confrontational. (J. Godec, November 14, 2017)

This might seem like a minor variation on the traditional "public hearing" seating arrangement, but it does highlight the nuanced actions some practitioners implement in their efforts to create appropriate venues.

The second consideration in arranging the venue for meetings, even if they are smaller, is related to the arrival of participants:

As people engage in a process and enter into a space, what are they thinking and feeling? Is parking or public transportation easy? Is it ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] accessible? Does it feel warm and welcoming when you're walking in? Do you have someone greeting them? How are the tables and chairs set up? All of those pieces matter. (W. Logue, founder and owner, The Logue Group, March 20, 2018)

This remark highlights the connections between the broader objectives facilitators seek to achieve, specific consideration regarding the venue's location, and ultimately the entire experience of understanding "what you're getting into" when arriving at a planning meeting. To the extent that facilitators can control this experience once a specific venue is selected, they generally make sure to welcome participants personally or delegate someone to that task. Facilitators can also create a welcoming environment by presenting some printed materials and/or a sign-in sheet on a table. Though this might not always be strictly necessary, carefully planning the arrival sequence of participants to clarify and potentially reinforce the metaphorical "world" participants are stepping into, to use John Forester's phrase (2018, p. 598), is an element these professional facilitators think about carefully.

The third aspect of arranging venues relates to the provision of refreshments. All facilitators we interviewed

prefer to serve food, with the specific choices depending on the time of day, length of the meeting, and particular considerations related to the community and/or issues at the center of the meeting. Several facilitators describe processes where the provision of specific items played a meaningful role and some consider the way in which food is delivered, preferring larger dishes or trays from which participants have to select items: "When folks have to physically intermingle, that creates more opportunities to interact than ordering pre-packed lunch in a box. It is more versatile" (C. Page, senior project and development lead, William D. Ruckelshaus Center, June 14, 2018). Dietary restrictions and preferences, both for individuals but especially at the community level, can play a role in selecting specific vendors or types of food as well. Here, too, these practitioners think carefully about how they translate objectives of fairness, empowerment, or neutrality into specific choices through venue creation: "If there's a dairy farmer involved in a planning process, I would certainly look for a way to include their goods into the process" (C. Page, June 14, 2018).

The attention to seemingly minor details contributes to the overall finding that experienced facilitators develop nuanced approaches to venue creation.

Implications for Scholarship and Practice

It is perhaps not surprising that these practitioners pay close attention to the venues where planning processes take place, given the frequency with which many of them organize meetings and the repeated declarations of the importance of venues in the practical guidance about participation and collaboration in planning. What does emerge from these interviews and the additional documents the practitioners use is the close connection between the broader process design objectives and the detailed, specific, and contextual decisions about venues that they make. Although the experiences of the facilitators we interviewed yield valuable insights and contribute to the VCT (Table 2), it appears the attention practitioners pay to venue creation is not matched by scholarly interest. But additional research and practice is required to develop a more rigorous and empirically grounded understanding of the relationships between the venues in which planning takes place and the experiences of participants, the dynamics during meetings, and the eventual outcomes of planning processes.

For many practitioners, venue creation is a frequent consideration. Our research highlights three aspects of immediate relevance. First, the broader objectives that planning processes seek to reflect are enacted through myriad nuanced decisions. When choosing between

two locations, should a planner prioritize convenience—for example, through public transit access—over comfort or a sense of community ownership over a space? The second outcome of relevance to practitioners is that making such choices in isolation is unwise. Instead, these facilitators suggest interacting with representatives, stakeholders, and community members to create venues that incorporate and translate their expectations and aspirations for the process. The third outcome of relevance is the VCT, which we believe can help practitioners consider the range of detailed choices and decisions considered relevant by both existing guidance on venue creation and the experiences and insights gathered through our research. Although we do not intend the tool to be followed step by step, it can provide opportunities for reflective and deliberative practitioners to enhance their approach to venue creation in a systematic fashion.

For planning scholars, these findings promote additional attention to and analysis of the venues in which meetings and processes of interest take place. This can happen in multiple ways, including more detailed descriptions of venues in analyses like case studies. In doing so, metalevel analyses of the connections between specific types of venues and various concepts of interest might become feasible. However, given the attention to the design and form of the urban realm present in much planning scholarship, a more design-oriented scholarship on venue creation would be of significant potential value, generating typologies or cartographies of venues for participation and collaboration. Continuing to pay relatively little or only tangential attention to the spaces in which participatory planning takes place risks ignoring potentially powerful factors that inform how planners and nonplanners alike make sense of “what they’re getting into.” As forms of online participation, pop-up meetings, and types of venues previously unrecognizable as “planning” emerge, a more robust empirical grounding for how planners think, talk, and write about venue creation can help improve the translation from lofty objectives to informed choices.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental data for this article can be found on the publisher’s website.

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