



ACADEMIC

Insights on youth engagement in the planning process

BY FEDERICO PALACIOS

This past summer, I had the opportunity to conduct meaningful research on urban youth engagement with Urban Minds. Urban Minds centres its work around the core belief that youth perspectives in city building are highly valuable. As city dwellers, youth have unique perspectives on urban spaces. Our take is that youth perspectives should inform how spaces and communities are planned. My research work at Urban Minds recognized the need to engage diverse communities and to plan for multi-generational outcomes. I sought to understand what contemporary youth engagement looked like in practice in the urban planning realm.

Throughout the summer, I interviewed 11 professionals, from a diverse range of fields, who shed some light on what youth engagement looks like on the ground.

“..youth perspectives should inform how spaces and communities are planned.”

Firstly, we heard that youth engagement is challenging. Educational barriers limit who is most able to engage in the planning process, and oftentimes youth don't make the cut. What's more, youth are a diverse bunch, with diverse backgrounds and needs. Our engagement with them must reflect this reality; youth engagement should be as dynamic as youth communities.

Thankfully, our work this summer uncovered some good news: getting started on youth engagement is relatively easy. Planners and engagement specialists can leverage existing skills to bring youth into the conversation. We can work to support youth and adults as they build their capacity to understand urban systems. The key to successful intergenerational interventions is in this capacity. As planning professionals, we have the ability to leverage

our rich networks and interdisciplinary partnerships – partnerships which, when fully leveraged, can support youth communities in urban spaces.

Our work also explored the intricacies of digital engagement, of importance now more than ever throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth have high standards for digital communications and expect graphically rich and highly curated campaigns. Planners must contemplate what digital engagement should look like in order to meet the needs of a generation of youth who grew up tapping, swiping, and liking.

“There truly is no shortage of ways to bring youth into the conversation.”

Even better news is the fact that there is no shortage of experience or know-how among planners and allied professionals. Our summer research project focused on creating a centralized repository of tools and strategies being deployed by professionals to engage youth. Our research is unique as we asked our respondents to elaborate on the youth-engagement tools they have leveraged throughout their careers. Each respondent presented their perspectives on how to engage youth in city building, each informed by their professional and personal experiences. The tools we

collected from participants are wide ranging, with interventions ranging from collaborative to arts-based, intersectional, and youth-led approaches. There truly is no shortage of ways to bring youth into the conversation.

These interviews inform Urban Mind’s soon-to-be released *Cities For Youth: Toolkit for Youth Engagement in Planning*. Our goal of creating this highly deployable toolkit for urban planners is to have a lasting impact on youth engagement in Ontario and beyond. Download a free digital copy at www.urbanminds.co. 



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