



The Community Design Charrette: An Introduction

The term "*Charrette*" is derived from the French word for "*cart*". At the Ecole Des Beaux Arts, the premiere school of Architecture in 19th century France, Architecture students were challenged with design assignments requiring intense work with very tight and inflexible deadlines. These exercises would culminate in feverish bursts of effort as the designs were drawn on large format boards for the final presentation. The arrival of the deadline was marked by the appearance of the Proctor's cart, or "*charrette*" making the rounds of the students' quarters to pick-up their work.

Over the years the term "*Charrette*" has become synonymous with an intense and time-constrained design project, workshop, or exercise. Design Charrettes can be associated with a variety of community based problem-solving and participatory design and planning activities. They can range from a few hours of intensive brainstorming to a sequence of sessions spanning several days or weeks.

The efforts of the San Mateo County Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (SMAIA) are rooted in its members' belief in the importance of community, service, and leadership by the architectural profession. These Charrettes present valuable opportunities for architects and other design professionals to serve the community.

AIA members understand that the combination of unencumbered creative problem solving and direct community participation is often the best way to begin addressing complex design and development issues. The AIASMC's charrette approach generates multiple visions rather than a single solution. The ability to quickly produce and share a number of possible visions of the future can be a crucial element in helping communities define and achieve their goals. The ideas can break through the deadlock of a debate that is limited to words and emotions prior to the charrette, overcome the inertia of preconceived notions and help illuminate a path to the future. A variety of graphically expressed concepts becomes the basis for further study, discussion, debate and eventually for civic action. The fact that the AIASMC has conducted many successful events over the past 25 years, up and down the Peninsula, reflects the Chapter's longstanding dedication to the needs of the communities in the area.

In 1982 a group of architects was asked to organize a Charrette to launch a local community's downtown storefront improvement program. This group of architects went on to found the AIASMC. Since that time we have organized and conducted over 18 Charrettes for various Peninsula communities.

If you are interested in having AIASMC organized and conducted a Charrette for your community, please contact us at aiasmc@sbcglobal.net or 650.348.5133.

Past AIA San Mateo County Charrettes:

San Mateo, "B" Street	1982	East Palo Alto, Community Design Charrette	1999
San Bruno, San Mateo Avenue	1986	Daly City, Geneva Avenue	1999
Half Moon Bay, Main Street	1990	Regional Urban Design Charrette	2000
Burlingame, Broadway/Bayshore	1994	San Mateo, Historic Main Street	2001
San Mateo, Transit Center / Train Station	1994	San Mateo, "Gateway to Central Park"	2004
Burlingame, Bus Depot	1994	Menlo Park, "Imagine a Downtown"	2005
San Carlos, Laurel Street	1995	Burlingame, "SoBA" (Howard Avenue)	2006
San Mateo, Main Library	1996	Daly City, Mission Street "Urban Design Charrette"	2008
South San Francisco, Downtown	1998	Menlo Park, Belle Haven & Willow Business Area	2011