AN ANCIENT WAY of WORKING enables the DESIGN PROCESS

In modern Western societies individuals sitting together in a circle to talk in an open and inclusive manner is unusual. People are more accustomed to meetings that are hierarchically structured with a fixed agenda where those who speak take 'positions', often in opposition to other positions, and where formal presentations, argument and attempts at persuasion, rather than shared thinking, are the norm. One barrier to shared thinking is the Western tendency to imagine that thinking is bounded by the limits of each person's mind. David Bohm, the nuclear physicist and philosopher, points to a different form of thinking. He calls it 'participatory thought'. It has been around much longer and is still evident among many tribal cultures. [i]

Gathering together in a circle to talk about issues affecting the community, to share thoughts and to make joint decisions is as old as humanity itself. Some American Indian tribes still use the Medicine Wheel or the Talking Stick to enable just and impartial hearing. The Maori in New Zealand have a well-established way of meeting and reaching decisions. They invite everybody remotely involved with a problem affecting the community to a *hui* (a large gathering) held on the *marae* (a tribal gathering place that serves social and spiritual purposes) where they meet together and come to agreed conclusions. The *hui* is conducted following long-standing protocols that determine the sequence of speakers and where they stand while speaking. They meet for as long as needed, extending through the day and night if necessary.

When the visiting party, *manuhiri,* are architects or other interested officials this approach gives the people of the tribe some control over the consultation process and gives architects an opportunity to learn about the tribe's perspective experientially. When the Maori tribes, iwi, were consulted in preparation for the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, this process was followed. Other client groups, not necessarily those with indigenous origins, may also have collaborative and inclusive approaches for making important decisions that can be used as a way of working with officials in those communities.

During briefing for the National Museum of the American Indian, twelve consultation workshops were held with tribal groups across the US. The architects joined in the preparation of these meetings, suggesting issues to be raised and questions to be asked but native facilitators led all the workshops while the architects listened and took notes. Justin Estoque, who served as the liaison between the Smithsonian (the client for the museum) and the architects, explained when natives are talking to natives, it was easy to follow protocols common to native culture. He reported that after the purpose of the project and the workshop had been explained, all participants introduced themselves, giving their names, their tribes and their reasons for coming to the workshop. People's spoken contributions were sometimes 'lengthy and rambling' but following the native way great respect was always shown when others were talking.

Carefully designed protocols that encourage participation enable creative work in all kinds of groups. To begin the design process for a primary school playground, Tony Ward led his students from the Auckland University School of Architecture through a guided meditation. As they lay in a circle on the ground of the site, they dreamed of possibilities for the playground. Afterwards they shared their dreams with each other and with the school children who participated in the playground's design. With funds raised by parents and staff, the architecture students constructed a multi-use adventure playground environment based on their dreams by imaginatively incorporating second-hand and recycled materials that also involved moving over 60 cubic metres of earth shaped into landscaped mounds and planting 200 native trees.

Architects and other professionals often gain essential information, insights and inspiration for their projects from participatory workshops. At the same time, through their involvement, participants learn about those whom they may have opposed initially, or been sceptical about and become committed to the project. This commitment can be extremely important when a project comes under threat.

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[i] David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, Routledge (London), 1996, p ix.