

Community Activism in an Era of Reduced Expectations: The Revival of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America

THOMAS BARRIE
Lawrence Technological University

“Perhaps never in history have the talents, skills, the broad vision and the ideals of the architecture profession been more urgently needed. The profession could be powerfully beneficial at a time when the lives of families and entire communities have grown increasingly fragmented, when cities are in an era of decline and decay instead of limitless growth, and when the value of beauty in daily life is often belittled.”

—Building Community, A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice by Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang

BACKGROUND

The formative period of community design in North America was the 1960's. During this time a confluence of grass-roots activism, the civil rights and anti-war movements, and increased civic and political engagement, produced the first wave of community design centers. Some were independent groups, such as the Architect's Renewal Committee founded in Harlem in 1964; some professional such as the AIA's R/UDAT program; others were university affiliated such as the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development founded in 1963.¹ Whitney Young's address to the 1968 AIA National Convention in which he chided the profession for its lack of civic engagement added additional impetus to the movement.

Community design centers and programs continued to be developed throughout the 1970's, but by the next decade they were in decline. The 1980's was a decade, in part, where the profession shifted to professional and business concerns, and academia retreated to arcane formal and theoretical emphasis'. These professional and academic prejudices were set in a larger cultural context distinguished by a loss of faith in the value of collective efforts and an emphasis on personal and corporate autonomy. As Christopher Lasch argues, it was a time when those with the most power to effect positive change “seceded not just from the common world around them but from reality itself.”² It was in this context that Amitai Etzioni in his communitarian manifesto called for a renewed commitment to an engaged social agenda and revived community.³

The 1990's brought a renewed commitment to the public realm and to proactive social responsibility by the profession and academia. Many new approaches to community design, programs and initiatives have been created in recent years at schools of architecture in North America. It was in this context that the ACSA Board of Directors founded the Architects in Society Committee in 1997 and conducted a national survey to document community design programs at schools of architecture in North America. The Source Book of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America, published by the ACSA, was the result of the survey and the ongoing work of the committee. It includes an astonishing array of programs and approaches but which all share the overall goal of serving students and society.

Community design programs provide numerous opportunities for students, faculty, schools, community and the profession. As outlined by Anthony Schuman in the introduction to the ACSA Sourcebook, they are “proving grounds for creative work, where students and faculty must meet tight budgets and code constraints without compromising design intentions.” For students “real world” projects provide a potent setting for multidisciplinary teamwork and engagement with the public in a setting where their work is taken seriously and the outcomes valued. For faculty, community-based projects provide opportunities for field and applied research and, if properly funded, the projects can facilitate expanded educational and outreach opportunities. Additionally, colleges and universities benefit from the high profile of community projects and design centers. Lani Guinier argues that universities can fill a critical niche in today's political setting. As she asserts, “The real domain for leadership in the 21st Century is the universities because the political arena has abdicated its responsibilities.” The public gets information, resources, and often a useful product at an affordable cost. The profession also benefits from the positive community outreach of the projects and the commissions they often create.

University-affiliated community design is not without its risks and problems, however. Of primary concern is the balancing of educational standards with community service. At the onset of any community design project, and throughout its duration, the educational goals of the project need to be clearly stated and reinforced. There are also concerns that student produced projects will under-

cut the profession and lower standards. There is also the danger of setting unrealistic goals and inflating community expectations. However, I would argue that if the educational focus and goals of the project are stressed throughout the process many of these concerns are minimized.

Most university affiliated community design centers emphasize the educational benefits of service learning. The Centre for Environmental Design Research and Outreach at Carleton University considers "information dissemination as an essential role," and The Design Center for American Urban Landscape at the University of Minnesota states that its mission is "to educate public and private decision makers, professionals, and citizens about the value of design... and expand the definition and field of urban design study." In this context, centers such as the Small Town Center at Mississippi State University intend to "influence public policy," and the Urban Community Improvement Program at the University of Nebraska encourages "more people to become active in the betterment of their neighborhoods." The outreach emphasis of the Urban Design Workshop at Yale University provides "the setting for lecture series, seminars, colloquia, and publications."

Some design centers emphasize research, such as the Architectural Research Center at Texas Tech which "promotes interdisciplinary research activity." At the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements (SIGUS) program at MIT, there is a particular emphasis on housing. Accessibility is the focus at The Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University of Buffalo, as it is at the Center for Universal Design at N.C. State University. Historic Preservation is one of the services that the City College of N.Y. Architectural Center provides for Harlem, and The Urban Technical Assistance Project at Columbia University "envisioned advanced technologies as playing an ever-increasing role in the generation of new knowledge concerning the urban environment."

Most programs consider working in the community to be an essential component. The Community-based Projects Program at Ball State University asserts that "a realistic understanding of urban problems can be best gained through a 'hands-on' approach," and their Mobile Assistance Studio — a 34' Coachman bus outfitted as an office — travels to small towns and cities to conduct workshops similar to the R/UDAT process. The Community Design Center at the University of Arkansas offers a summer program where students live and work in a small town for eight weeks.

Many centers serve to bridge the gap between the academy and the profession. The Tejido program at the University of Arizona pairs professionals with students in their service projects. At the Student's Design Clinic at Carleton University, architectural services are provided by students for a fee, and at Yale University there are paid internships available for students. The SIGUS program at MIT offers a "Visiting Practitioner's Program" which is a "2 - 3 month self-motivated program" at the university.

Some programs are extensive and well-established, such as the Pratt Institute Center previously mentioned, which has a staff of thirty-three and produces over eighty projects a year, or the Asian Neighborhood Design Center in Berkeley, CA, where most of the

services are provided by staff. Some are more modest. All share a commitment to education and service, and of providing a two-way connection between the university and community.

THE DETROIT STUDIO

Lawrence Technological University's Detroit Studio is located in a storefront space in central Detroit and works primarily in Detroit's neighborhoods. It was founded in 1999 by the College of Architecture & Design to provide students with an enriched educational experience through community-based architectural, urban design and community development projects. It provides the setting for interdisciplinary collaboration and team-work through projects that address real needs, problems and potentials for communities in Detroit, Wayne County and Southeastern Michigan as part of the mission of a local university. The studio's location also provides urban design research opportunities.

Lawrence Tech is the first school of architecture in Michigan to establish an off-campus community studio in central Detroit.⁴ The College of Architecture and Design has a long history of design studios working with communities that have earned the program a national reputation as a place that offers students real-world experience while engaging the public and serving the community. The Detroit Studio provides facilities for 35 Junior, Senior and Graduate students. Six full and part-time faculty are based in the studio.⁵ The goals of The Detroit Studio include: expanded educational opportunities for students; a setting for field and applied research; and collaboration with, and service to, the public and the profession.

The Youth Village Urban Design Project

During spring semester 2000 the Youth Village Urban Design Project was conducted at The Detroit Studio. The project's emphasis on collaboration and engagement with the community illustrates many of the goals of the studio. Moreover, the educational goals of the project reflect some of the benefits of community design. Its primary goal was the education of the students through a "real world" project." However, its educational goals also included engaging residents, the public, government officials and other stakeholders. The Mission Statement for the project articulated the goals of educating "students about urban design, architecture, and community input, through a real-world project," and providing "useful urban design and housing information to the city, public and residents, so that they can be articulate about their city and neighborhood, and thus can participate in its future effectively and successfully."⁶

The project was produced by senior and graduate students enrolled in the Collaborative Design Studio, a for-credit course that undertakes projects in urban and architectural design for cities in southeastern Michigan. Additionally, two students from the Community and Economic Development Program at Michigan State University conducted demographic research and provided an economic development feasibility study, sixteen LTU architecture students in a

landscape architecture course provided landscape designs, and seven LTU photography students documented the project area. The project was funded by the Northern Area Association, a consortium of community-based organizations supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation as part of its Kellogg Youth Initiative Program.

The project included the urban design of an approximately sixty acre area in central Detroit. It is a mostly residential area that is distinguished by Woodward Avenue, Detroit's symbolic central avenue. Like the city itself, the study area has a rich and varied history. And like the city this history is partially obscured by the loss of buildings and by banal new developments. It is an area long established as a black community,⁷ and because of its large number of significant churches, some of which date from the early twentieth century, it was known at one time as "Piety Hill."⁸ At its peak, businesses, apartments, hotels, and civic institutions lined a vibrant Woodward Avenue, which was the center of an affluent community of gracious single family houses⁹ that included significant examples of architecture.

By the 1950's, however, the area began to change as people moved to the suburbs. The 1967 civil disturbance is particularly significant to the study area which was directly impacted by the looting and arson that took place throughout the week.¹⁰ Many of the histories, either personal or institutional, seem to either begin or end in 1967. By the 1970's most of the middle class had left. Now the study area is perceived as a poor area wracked by neglect and disinvestment, and often characterized as one of Detroit's many dangerous and undesirable neighborhoods. The demographics of the study area reveal a poor, aging population, with the full range of challenges typical of distressed urban areas. Deterioration and criminal activity, and the lack of city and community services are seen by residents and outsiders alike as daunting and dominant concerns. However, the area is also known as the "Kellogg Youth Village" and described as a model of neighborhood initiative and revitalization.

Project Process and Scope

The project included working closely with the Northern Area Association, neighborhood groups, the City of Detroit, local businesses and developers, and other civic, municipal, and community institutions. Guest critics provided a national context to the project. Each worked with the students individually, participated in critiques, and presented lectures.¹¹ The process included community input through a community design workshop, and a number of public presentations and forums.¹²

Over 200 people attended a week-long Community Design Workshop conducted at The Detroit Studio. The workshop comprised a kick-off presentation, a series of workshops that were open to all residents, and numerous special focus sessions. Throughout, the goals of educating both the students and the public were reinforced.¹³ In the context of working with the residents, we adopted William Morrish's argument that "neighborhood planning is primarily a process to learn about where you live... how to shape it for the

better... and how to sustain it for the long term,"¹⁴ and John Forester's assertion that "when city planners deliberate with city residents, they shape public learning as well as public action."¹⁵

The urban design study had a particular emphasis on Woodward Avenue, housing, neighborhood shopping, blighted areas and open space. Issues such as community identity, multi-use development, civic buildings, pedestrian accessibility, public transportation, streetscapes, parks and public space were addressed and documented by the urban design plan.¹⁶

The Urban Design Plan

The Urban Design Plan is built around the concept of the Youth Village — an "urban village" centered on the high school and its adjacent civic institutions. It is envisioned as a hub that connects neighborhoods on either side of Woodward Avenue, and as a center that establishes the identity of the Youth Village community. Like a typical village, the Youth Village would include a range of businesses, civic institutions and services surrounding a prominent town green. Woodward Avenue is conceived as a grand avenue which links the village with downtown Detroit. Neighborhoods surround the village, each distinguished by its own unique blend of homes, corner stores, and green spaces.

The plan also includes proposals for new civic, educational and commercial buildings, single and multi-family housing prototypes, parks and greenways, and public transportation. It aims to establish create a coherent physical environment where residences, shops, workplaces, civic buildings, and parks form a compact unified whole. Pedestrians, bicycles and automobiles are appropriately accommodated by a non-hierarchical network of neighborhood streets and linked greenways and green spaces. Clusters of commercial and civic buildings contribute to the community's identity and serve its business and social needs.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

When successful, community design programs and projects can effectively bridge the gaps between the academy, the public, and the profession. Students, faculty, colleges, universities, the public and the profession can all benefit from the educational and collaborative nature of the work. This is an essential issue. As John Forester asserts "practitioners without insight will be callous, barely competent, if not altogether ineffective; students and theorists of planning without the moral perception — the appreciation — of what is pressing in real cases will be naive and irrelevant, of not unwittingly condescending and disrespectful too."¹⁸

The process and final plan of the Youth Village Urban Design Project will be published in a 76 page handbook. Every participant, affected institution, appropriate city official, potential funding source, and interested resident will receive a copy.¹⁹ The publication focuses on the process of community input and strategies for guiding positive change in the project area. Resources are docu-

mented to aid in the process. It clearly states that it is not the final plan — which should be developed by professionals — but a means to create one. In this context, it aims to empower local institutions, organizations and residents.²⁰

Throughout the project the educational orientation of The Detroit Studio were reinforced. Its primary goals are to educate students about urban design through projects that include many of the challenges faced by cities across America; and to educate residents and city officials about the process of community input, and the value of good urban design. It is our hope that the students will bring to the profession a broader context to their work and a renewed social conscience, and that the public will be able to understand the physical features of their neighborhoods, and participate in their future substantially and effectively. In this context, university affiliated community design programs such as The Detroit Studio can provide an essential means of community activism to students and faculty in an era and a profession that has reduced expectations about the value of social engagement.

NOTES

¹See Rex Curry's "History of Community Design" in the ACSA Sourcebook of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America for more information.

²Lasch, Christopher. The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy. New York, W.W. Norton Co. Inc., 1995, p.20

³Etzioni, Amitai. The Spirit of Community. The Reinvention of American Society. New York, Touchstone Books, 1994

⁴The University of Detroit Mercy has their nationally recognized Collaborative Design Center housed in the School of Architecture.

⁵Courses offered at the Detroit Studio include: Integrated Design Studios 3 & 4 (a Junior Year, team-taught studio comprising architectural design, urban planning, building systems and landscape architecture); the Collaborative Design Studio (a Senior-Graduate urban design studio); and photography. Thesis students also utilize the Downtown Studio, and courses completed there satisfy requirements for the Area of Concentration in Collaborative Urban Design. Other faculty and students utilize the studio on an informal basis. The studio is fully equipped with dedicated work stations, two in-studio computer labs, meeting and classroom spaces, an exhibition area, and a darkroom.

⁶The rest of the Mission included the following:

- Community Input
- To include community participation in the planning process as an essential component — because it is valuable, necessary, and the right thing to do.
- To insure that everyone who has a stake in the project is invited, but to proceed with those that attend.
- To listen to all views and respect all opinions.
- Planning
- To produce an Urban Design Plan for the project area that builds upon its strengths and mitigates its weaknesses.
- Product
- To document the project's process and results with a high-quality publication.
- To provide a foundation for subsequent professional design development and implementation.

⁷Beginning in the 1920's the area also developed into a significant Jewish community

⁸The Youth Village area was also at one time a home to Detroit's gay community.

⁹Including Henry Ford's house on Edison Avenue built in 1909.

¹⁰Also, one the most symbolic and troubling events of the riots happened at the Algiers Hotel at the corner of Woodward and Virginia Park. Here, during a morning raid following suspicion that a sniper was in the hotel annex, three black men were killed by Detroit police officers. The three men killed on July 26, 1967 were Carl Cooper, Aubrey Pollard and Fred Temple. For a complete account of this event see Hersey, John. The Algiers Hotel Incident. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1972.

¹¹They included: Eric Hill FAIA, Manager of Urban Design and Planning at Albert Kahn Associates; David Gamble, Assistant Professor at Syracuse University; Thomas Dutton, Professor at University of Miami, Ohio; and Lillian Randolph, Director of the Center for Urban Affairs, Community and Economic Development Program at Michigan State University.

¹²The project was guided by a ten member Steering Committee comprised residents of the study area. An eighteen member Advisory Committee composed of representatives from the city and county provided additional input.

¹³At the kick-off meeting and presentation, the research and analysis were presented including the assets and liabilities previously outlined. One of the goals of illustrating the characteristics of the project area to residents was to help them to recognize the physical features of their homes and neighborhoods. By helping residents to understand the local and regional context of the site, practical and appropriate ideas in response to the context can be generated and needs established based on assets not liabilities. Also at the kick-off meeting, preliminary ideas, strategies and visions were presented in the context of building upon what works, and mitigating what doesn't. Additionally, urban design principles and examples of successful American urbanism were shown.

¹⁴Morrish, William R. and Brown, Catherine R. Planning to Stay: Learning to See the Physical Features of Your Neighborhood. Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 1994

¹⁵Forester, John. The Deliberative Practitioner. Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1999,

¹⁶The study included the following:

- A review of the existing land-use, circulation, transportation, open space and zoning codes;
- an inventory and grading of existing housing and building stock;
- an inventory of city owned land;
- an analysis of the physical characteristics of the study area;
- a study of the history of the area;
- research on contemporary urban design theories and precedents;
- the urban design of the project area including guidelines for incremental and phased development;
- specific architectural proposals for selected sites;
- urban design principles, overlay zoning, and architectural codes;
- the city approval process for urban design plans; and
- an Economic Development Feasibility Study.

¹⁷Adapted from the "Traditional Neighborhood Development District, Metropolitan Dade County, Florida, April, 1991," by Duany Plater-Zyberk.

¹⁸Forester, John., p.243

¹⁹All libraries at accredited schools of architecture in North America will also receive a copy.

²⁰It also asserts that urban design is only one component necessary for community revitalization. A full range of community, economic and social programs are also necessary.