COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community Engagement: The Evolution of Architecture’s Social Vocation in Schools of Architecture

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ANTECEDENTS

While architecture has been concerned with the individual human subject since the time of Vitruvius, and large scale public works have an even longer history, attention to the collective social condition is of relatively recent vintage.1 In Europe it can be traced to two great social upheavals in the early twentieth century, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the advent of Social Democracy in Germany. These historical events produced a new client for architecture—the working class; a new patron—the modern state; and a new program—workers’ housing and social facilities like cultural clubs, clinics, and schools. Institutionalized educationally at schools like the Vkhutemas in the Soviet Union and the Bauhaus in Germany, and promoted professionally by the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), the modern movement advanced a visual index of social progress, linking reformist social goals to a new form of architectural expression. By positing a relationship between physical form and social program, they linked modern architecture’s twin parameters of aesthetic expression and social application in a dynamic dualism within architecture’s core mission over most of the last century.

The signal contribution made by CIAM to this discourse, for both better and worse, was to focus attention on architecture’s abstract client, “the greater number”—the masses of people who had never before had access to high-quality design in their daily environment. CIAM’s leaders presumed that architects knew best what these anonymous people needed and also what their new social architecture should look like. Thus modern materials, methods, and building techniques were put in the service of social meanings, with flat roofs and flush facades, for example, becoming signifiers of social democracy. In at least one notorious early example, Le Corbusier’s workers’ housing in Pessac, France, this approach was strongly rejected by the occupants, who transformed their surroundings to conform more to the local vernacular. Confronted with the contradiction between the architect’s intentions and the occupants’ preferences, Le Corbusier was obliged to acknowledge, “It is always life that is right and the architect who is wrong…”ii

THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SHIFT

In the United States, as modern architecture gradually took hold in the era just before and following World War II, the reformist social agenda of the European movement was dropped in favor of a concentration on private homes and corporate office buildings. Despite the efforts of such outspoken advocates as Lewis Mumford and Catherine Bauer or technological thinkers such as Buckminster Fuller, its progressive objectives initially gained little traction. Architectural modernism was famously given legitimacy at the Museum of Modern Art’s “International Style” exhibition in 1932, but the European linkage between form and program was ignored and the new architecture reduced almost purely to aesthetics.
Yet if the social mission of modern architecture was discarded in practice, it was sustained by a few leading American educators in the most progressive schools of the day, which registered the influence of the social developments in Europe and hired leading modernist émigrés. At Harvard, Dean Joseph Hudnut identified “scientific instruction in Housing” in the mid-1930s as the most pressing need of architecture education. He brought in Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius as chair of the architecture department, with a mandate to refocus the curriculum on housing and “civic design.” Hudnut and Gropius would eventually fall out over the diagrammatic quality of Gropius’s design teaching at the expense, Hudnut argued, of a richer, more personal design expression. Yet both men, like the Spanish émigré José Luis Sert, who acceded to the double role of chair and dean at Harvard in 1952, proceeded from the assumption that the architect arrived at design solutions through rigorous intellectual application and prototypical solutions, serving a public that for all intents and purposes remained abstract, anonymous and remote. In their elite role as experts, architects apparently did not feel a need for any direct interaction with the public on whose behalf they worked.

During this same period architect William Wurster, as dean first at MIT and then at the University of California at Berkeley, established multi-disciplinary faculties including economics, planning and sociology. With his wife, the noted planner and housing reformer Catherine Bauer, they developed a social factors curriculum that laid the groundwork for future community engagement efforts there and elsewhere. But more typically schools still relied on the architect as the guardian of social order. As late as 1966 Dean Charles Colbert of Columbia University’s architecture school summarized his institution’s role as helping “unscramble urban confusion,” positing the architectural educator as “the proper custodian of more humane qualities in our city centers.”

**ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM**

It remained for the social movements of the 1960s to change the consciousness of North American architects and move them to engage face to face with the communities for whom they professed to act. In 1962, Michael Harrington’s book *The Other America* shocked readers with its portrayal of extensive poverty in the world’s wealthiest nation. Martin Luther King Jr.’s challenges to the racial barriers that had remained essentially unchanged since Reconstruction became impossible to ignore. Presaged by President John F. Kennedy’s call to national service in his inaugural address of 1961, and continuing through Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, a new national will to community involvement, and the funding to back it up, came into being.

In the intense period of social activism and civil rights protests of the mid-1960s, when dramatic change seemed both desirable and possible, students and professionals alike were impelled by moral and social imperatives. Communities marched under banners proclaiming “Power to the People,” fighting to reverse the ravages of urban renewal and to confront the legacy of discrimination that had produced a society whose racial bifurcation was etched in its residential landscape. The turmoil in the streets was matched by intellectual ferment. In a span of five years, three groundbreaking books challenged orthodox modernist thinking about planning, the environment, and architecture: Jane Jacobs’s *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), and Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966).

In addition to these influences, students and young architects were inspired by a number of new directions within the profession. Christopher Alexander and John F.C. Turner introduced site and service strategies for the squatter settlements of South America. The Team Ten group sought to shift the focus within CIAM from functional categories to patterns of human association, notably in the work of Giancarlo di Carlo and Aldo van Eyck. Lucien Kroll pioneered new participatory design methodologies. The incipient environmental movement coalesced around concepts like Buckminster Fuller’s Spaceship Earth and Stewart Brands’ *Whole Earth Catalog*, emerging with the first Earth Day celebration in 1970. The New Left politics of the 1960s led in two directions. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) insisted on radical social change while Jerry Rubin and
Abbie Hoffman headed the more free-spirited Yippie (Youth International Party) movement. Their invitation to “do it” resonated with the impatience to create alternative models of society, as realized in projects like Drop City and symbolized to the larger world by event/happenings like Woodstock. These twin tendencies – toward political organizing on the one hand and experiments in building community on the other -- were encapsulated in the brief history of The Architects Resistance, a loose organization based in northeastern schools founded as a “communications network, a research group and an action group” whose goal was “to bring moral and social conscience to the practice of architecture”.

Socially committed architectural professionals across the United States joined the fray. In 1963, the Architects’ Renewal Committee in Harlem (ARCH) began operations as the nation’s first community design center (CDC). That same year, Pratt Institute launched its Community Education Program, forerunner of the Pratt Center, which remains the nation’s longest continuously operating school-based CDC. Programs centered on community activism quickly followed at Ball State University, North Carolina State University, and the University of New Mexico. Canadian schools reacted similarly to the displacement of poor urban residents by demolitions for highway construction and urban renewal. The most substantial response was the Community Design Workshop at McGill University, founded in 1969, which ran studios in three different Montreal neighborhoods and formed a nonprofit corporation to buy and rehabilitate slum housing.

**THE SOCIAL AGENCY OF DESIGN**

While these early forays into community engagement varied considerably in their emphasis, ranging from political confrontation to participatory planning and urban design, they shared a few salient characteristics. All espoused a philosophy of engaging students in the social issues of the day and upheld the importance of supplementing classroom learning with direct neighborhood contact. This was a watershed change from the Bauhaus model of remote attention to generic and somewhat abstract formulations of social issues. Faculty and students proceeded from the belief that professionals had the obligation to make their expertise available to those lacking the economic or political influence to secure these services on their own. At a time when it was unusual for municipal planning agencies to seek input from neighborhood groups, these students and faculty believed that the planning and design professions could make a significant contribution toward improving living conditions in inner-city neighborhoods.

![Columbia students working in East Harlem with Real Great Society Urban Planning Studio, 1969.](image)

Their confidence in the social agency of design had roots not only in the progressive social agenda of the European modern movement, but also in the democratic idealism on which the American nation was founded. This particularly American blend of pragmatism and idealism had reemerged at various points in the nation’s history, from the early communitarian experiments and Progressive Era reforms to the extensive New Deal public works initiatives. A number of architecture schools sought to establish long-term working relationships with their community clients, moving beyond the limiting constraints of the semester-long project-based studio curriculum. Although some of this work produced buildings and public amenities, the emphasis was on the social and economic health of the local neighborhoods. The battle cries were participatory design and advocacy planning.

The 1960s also saw the introduction of design/build programs, starting in 1967 with...
Yale's First Year Building Project. The design/build approach focused on the pedagogical benefits of involving students in actual construction (learning by doing), providing a community service as a collateral benefit. In initiating the program at Yale, architecture chair Charles Moore sought a small community where the design/build project could have an immediate impact. The first project was built in an Appalachian community in Eastern Kentucky, where a first-year architecture student had spent the prior year as a political organizer working with the Community Development Institute of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. One of the student's advisers had been trained in Chicago by Saul Alinsky, a founder of the modern community-organizing movement. Thus at its outset, only one degree of separation existed between design/build and community organizing.

RETREAT AND RESURGENCE

During the 1970s and 1980s, dedicated educators at many architecture schools persevered with community engagement efforts, but social concerns were increasingly eclipsed as a wave of formalist and theoretical preoccupations swept over the architectural publications and lecture circuits. In the political sphere Ronald Reagan's two terms as president, lasting from 1981 to 1989, saw a dramatic reduction in assistance to community development. Then, in the 1990s, during the presidency of William Clinton, interest in community engagement rebounded as new funding opportunities opened up through programs like the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC), established in 1994. This program encouraged universities to collaborate with local groups. At the same time, public universities were pressured by state legislatures to show how their support benefited local communities. After a decade of formally and theoretically driven investigations, disenchanted students were eager to reconnect with "real" projects and to find alternatives to the emergent "star architect" role model. In 1997 the board of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) established the Architecture in Society committee to encourage this reconnection. ACSA's annual Collaborative Practice Awards program was born of this initiative.

An ACSA survey in 1998 indicated that forty-six architecture schools had operating community-design programs. The results revealed that over half the university-based programs in the survey had been started in the 1990s, confirming an upsurge in interest on the part of students and faculty alike. Only four of the programs could trace their origins back to the 1960s, and an equal number to the 1970s, attesting to the difficulties of sustaining community-design programs over the long haul. The eight surviving programs owed their longevity in large measure to the continuing involvement and commitment of their founding leaders. In the years since the 1998 survey, as several of the founders reached retirement age, some programs accomplished a successful transition—among them, the Pratt Center, the Ball State Community-Based Project program, and the Design and Planning Assistance Center at the University of New Mexico. Other programs did not. The Community Development Group at North Carolina State and the City Design Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago both ceased operations on the retirement of their founders, demonstrating that in addition to dedicated leadership community-design programs need a carefully planned transition and committed institutional support.

HUMANITARIAN ARCHITECTURE

The twenty-first century has seen a number of new avenues for community engagement in both the schools and the profession. Several national efforts have been initiated by young architecture graduates eager to tap design talent for humanitarian and social objectives. Design Corps, a nonprofit based in Raleigh, North Carolina, was founded by Bryan Bell in 1995. Its annual "Structures for Inclusion" conference has provided a rallying point for both academic and field-based practitioners of community design, and its efforts have been documented in two books. Architecture for Humanity was founded by Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr in 1999 to promote architectural solutions to humanitarian crises. The organization now has offices in the United States, Haiti, and South Africa, with thirty design fellows positioned around the globe and eight local
chapters in the United States, where members undertake local pro bono projects. In 2002, San Francisco architect John Peterson created Public Architecture to provide pro bono services and encourage other firms to donate one percent of their billable working hours to free services dedicated to the public welfare.

Interest in humanitarian work in recent years has been quickened by a series of political and environmental disasters starting with the attacks of September 11, 2001, and continuing with the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, and the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. After the September 11th attacks Architecture for Humanity reported a fourfold increase in membership, with upticks following each of the succeeding catastrophes. These events constituted a call to conscience, prompting people in all fields to reevaluate their priorities and commitments in the face of human suffering. Because the reconstruction needs spoke so directly to architects’ skills, however, many felt a sense of urgency to respond. Architects and students volunteered in rebuilding efforts, from week-long stints cleaning debris in New Orleans to design/build projects in affected areas. Some professionals completely reconfigured their practice; Mississippi architect David Perkes set up the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio in Biloxi, where his team of full-time architects and students from Mississippi State University and other schools around the country has been instrumental in stabilizing that state’s hard-hit coastal towns.

If the Gulf Coast CDS follows in the tradition of full-time, place-based community design centers, the larger thrust of community engagement activity in recent years has been toward design/build. Where earlier efforts grew out of community organizing, the Civil Rights movement, and the Women’s movement, and were grounded in the theories of Jane Jacobs, Alinsky, Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire, the newer cohort is more likely to be following the siren call of the late Sam Mockbee, whose Rural Studio at Auburn University provided the most visible and captivating outpost of design/build activity. Short-term design projects on the Mockbee model continue to be the staple of community engagement projects in schools of architecture, harnessing the desires of students to express themselves with innovative designs to an idealistic social purpose. The emphasis on design has restored aesthetic credibility to an enterprise that has been characterized, often unfairly, as emphasizing progressive social ideas at the expense of progressive formal thinking. The scaling down of goals and expectations from demands for fundamental social change to small, realizable construction projects provides a better fit with academic schedules. It makes success measurable and visible within a short time frame. At the same time, beyond their intrinsic value in providing design services to underserved communities, these programs place students in direct contact with communities in need, sometimes capturing their ongoing commitment. Since 1987 architect Sergio Palleroni has conducted extended design-build programs with students from a half dozen US and Canadian schools in several international locations. In 1995 Steve Badanes and Palleroni created a design-build program in Cuernavaca, Mexico. For both men this program was grounded in years of preparation—Palleroni building on prior work with Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich in Cuernavaca, Badanes following a long career as the apostle of design-build, first with his firm Jersey Devil, and then with the Neighborhood Design Build studio at the University of Washington. For Palleroni, the goal of these ongoing projects is to guide students and communities into finding opportunities for change, whether these come in the form of technical innovations, financing strategies like micro-lending, or other avenues toward sustainable community development.

SOCIAL CHANGE

Notwithstanding the generational shift toward design/build, a small but significant number of architecture programs have continued to pursue community engagement as a catalyst for social change. They have fostered critical practices that situate design activities in a wider public debate about social equity, diversity, and the very nature of democratic society. In Cincinnati, Miami University’s Center for Community Engagement, founded in 2002 in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, is the outgrowth of twenty-five years of advocacy work in the neighborhood by its director, Thomas Dutton. It has developed into a residential academic program where
students live full-time in the community. In addition to a design/build project, they take a full academic load including courses in the American city, urban geography, and social work. The program includes “agit-prop” projects that visually dramatize local issues, such as the silhouette plywood cutouts to symbolize the “gaze that renders homeless people invisible” and to protest the demolition of an affordable housing resource in the neighborhood.

The program’s goals are avowedly transformational, for both the community and the students themselves, whose personal experiences are carefully documented each semester. At the University of Memphis, a new M. Arch program established in 2008 has defined its program as “a culture of community engagement” serving Memphis and the Mid-South region.

**IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST**

The realm of community engagement encompasses a wide range of activity that may be place-based, issue-based (housing for migrant workers, for example), or project-based (design/build). A number of new umbrella terms have been coined to categorize the range of these activities under rubrics like “public architecture,” “activist architecture,” and “public interest architecture.” Field reports from both the community-design centers and the more ambitious design/build programs suggest that the underlying principle that makes community engagement successful, whatever its label, is an approach that identifies local skills and resources, treats the community as an equal partner, and pursues an open and sustained process of exchange. The architect brings a lot to the table besides design skills: clarity of vision, synthetic thinking, links to financial and institutional support. But unless the community process builds consensus and identifies shared values through public discourse, the intervention is not likely to have staying power. The importance of process highlights the benefits of long-term involvement with a single community. As Roberta Feldman, founding director of the City Design Center, observes, long-term relationships that go beyond a single project provide “the opportunity to build up mutual trust and understanding, and increase our impact on both the leaderships’ and organizations’ "empowerment" (ability to work on their own behalf), as well as our own capabilities to work more effectively on community design projects.” Since the 1960s, participation in many kinds of community engagement programs has offered architecture students an intense and often transformative educational experience, taking them out into the world and bringing the world into the studio and classroom. Of equal importance is the ability of the engagement to provide a transformative experience for the community as well, because the real measure of these programs’ success is the ability and will of the community to follow up after the architects are gone.

Community engagement efforts are fraught with the potential for conflict, misunderstanding and disappointment. Some faculty are skeptical about the value of community engagement in the education of an architect, while community residents and activists, for their part, are often equally skeptical about the motives and efficacy of student efforts. Student incursions into impoverished, largely minority communities may be interpreted as a paternalistic gesture, a form of noblesse oblige. Students themselves are not unaware of this possible reading of their intentions. At Yale, student
protests about the Kentucky studio led to its relocation back to the school’s New Haven campus. And among theorists of social change, advocacy planning itself has been seen as a time-consuming, palliative effort that does not strike at the roots of social problems or push for systemic change.\textsuperscript{viii}

At issue, of course, is whether the primary goal of the engagement is social change, focused on the community benefit, or a pedagogical strategy focused on the student. In 1909, at the first National Conference on City Planning, English planner T.C. Horsfall asked, in an implicit critique of the City Beautiful movement, whether the goal of planning ought to be a more beautiful city, or “a more beautiful life.”\textsuperscript{vi} The same question might be asked today of school-based community engagement efforts. The question of course, is rhetorical. There is no reason why the goal of a healthy and just society cannot be wedded to architecture’s traditional focus on physical design. This linkage is precisely the goal of an informal network growing out of the Structures for Inclusion conferences under the banner of SEED (Social, Economic, Environmental Design).

SEED’s community design practitioners believe that even small scale interventions can have a lasting impact. This proposition is convincingly demonstrated in the 2010 exhibition “Small Scale, Big Change” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, where eleven projects from around the world combined architectural excellence with social purpose.\textsuperscript{x}

This welcome expansion of professional attention to social architecture is significant in several ways. While some of the protagonists can trace their roots to the1960s, most are younger, and many of these can trace their own involvement to exposure to community engagement while in school. Perhaps most importantly, the wide range of community design efforts offers multiple models of individual commitment and professional practice so that unlike the sixties, when structures for community engagement had to be invented by students and young professionals, there now exists a great reservoir of experience that schools can draw on in developing their own approach to architecture’s social vocation.

\textsuperscript{1}I wish to acknowledge the helpful information and commentary provided by a number of colleagues in the preparation of this article: Steve Badanes, Bryan Bell, John Cary, David Covo, Tom Dutton, Tony Costello, Joe Baker, Roberta Feldman, Tom Fisher, Phillip Gallegos, Michael Hagge, Sally Harrison, Joan Ockman, Sergio Palleroni, Patrick Peters, John Peterson, Ron Shiffman, Cameron Sinclair, Robert Swenson, Craig Wilkins and Rebecca Williamson.

\textsuperscript{2}Quoted in Philippe Boudon, \textit{Lived-In Architecture: Le Corbusier’s Pessac Revisited}, trans. Gerald Onn (Boston, Mass: MIT Press, 1979), 2. Whether Le Corbusier honored this dictum in his subsequent work is open to question. In his Obus plan for Algiers, a linear highway with plug-in apartments along endless ribbons of floors, Le Corbusier penciled in some homes in the North African vernacular, not unlike some of the transformations to his houses in Pessac.


\textsuperscript{6}The Architects Resistance (TAR), “Architecture and Racism”, undated pamphlet from 1969. TAR published two other white papers – “Architecture and the Nuclear Arms Race” and “Architecture: Whom Does It Serve”, all aimed at pushing the AIA to reconsider its social role. After a year of publishing white papers and holding a notable demonstration in front of the offices of Skidmore Owings and Merrill to protest that firm’s work in South Africa, TAR decided to dissolve rather than bog down in internal debates over building communes versus maintaining a more political focus. The TAR papers are available in the archives at Butler Library, Columbia University. A manuscript on TAR is in preparation by Chris Barker.


\textsuperscript{8}Much of this work followed the precepts laid out by Paul Davidoff in his article “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning,” \textit{Journal of the American Institute of Planners} Vol. 31, Issue 4 (1965), 331 – 338.
Robert Swenson, e-mail correspondence with author. For a detailed account of design/build at Yale, see Richard W. Hayes, The Yale Building Project: The First 40 Years (New Haven, CT: The Yale School of Architecture, 2007).


One prominent CDC that emerged in this period is the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit Mercy, founded in 1994 by Father Terrence Curry. The DCDR is an example of how a neighborhood design studio can evolve into a full-fledged community design center.


For a first-hand account of this work by the director of the center, see Thomas A. Dutton, “Engaging the School of Social Life: A Pedagogy Against Oppression,” in Dan Pitera and Craig Wilkins, eds. Activist Architecture: A Field Guide to Community Design Practice (manuscript in preparation).

Tom Fisher has advanced this notion by drawing an analogy to the field of public health with its emphasis on long-term preventive care as opposed to custom solutions to site-specific problems. His essay “In the Public’s Interest: Creating Public-Interest Design Internships” will appear in Bridging the Gap: Architectural Internships in Public Service, a forthcoming book edited by Georgia Bizios and Katie Wakeford.

Roberta Feldman, e-mail message to author, July 4, 2010.


For an exposition of this critique, as well as rejoinders from leading advocate planners including Chester Hartman and Linda and Paul Davidoff, see Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, The Politics of Turmoil (New York: Pantheon, 1974).
