

Architecture for the Public Good A Problematic Development Process

DAVID KRATZER

Philadelphia University

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other. Hannah Arendt; "The Public Realm: The Common"¹

We know homelessness is a solvable problem. The challenge is to commit the political will. Sister Mary Scullion; Project H.O.M.E.²

Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, What are you doing for others? Martin Luther King, Jr.³



Figure 1. 2400 Block of Kensington Avenue

THE DESIGN STUDIO PROBLEM

In the Spring of 2011, a fifth year senior architecture design studio at Philadelphia University undertook the task of designing a homeless assistance center with the charge of exploring the socio-political condition of architecture. It was the responsibility of the students

to propose a site, develop a specific architectural program and generate a design proposal. The initial four weeks of research on the homeless condition included numerous studio presentations, visits to existing homeless shelters and social facilities, tours of Center City Philadelphia and the disadvantaged West Kensington neighborhoods. Beginning with the basic conditions of hunger, poverty, employment, and housing, the studio was immediately confronted with some sobering facts:⁶

- 64% of homeless suffer from some form of addiction. 26% suffer from some form of mental illness. 23% of homeless are military veterans.
- 40% of the US population was at risk for becoming homeless if one of their family members had a catastrophic illness in 2009. 16% of the population had no health insurance.
- Nationally, children make up 12% of the homeless population; families 36%.
- By 2015, 25% of children in the US will be living below the poverty level and will suffer from hunger and food insecurity.⁷
- In the US, 13 homeless children die on the street each day.
- Philadelphia is one of the 10 poorest cities in the country per capita.
- Philadelphia has 4,000 to 5,000 homeless

within a total city population in excess of 1.45 million.

- 30% of Philadelphia residents received food from the PA State Food Purchase Program in 2010.
- 51% of food pantries and soup kitchens in Philadelphia did not have enough food to meet demand in 2009 and turned away 45% of guests due to lack of meals.
- There are 900 homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food pantries in Philadelphia.
- The City of Philadelphia received \$21,486,240 from the Federal American Recovery Act for Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Act from 2009 to 2011 – a three year period. Rapid re-housing is an emerging national best practice of moving the homeless quickly into permanent housing instead of emergency shelters.⁸
- In 2010, two tent cities existed in the Philadelphia area. One was located near the University of Pennsylvania campus housing a small number of homeless, and Camden, NJ which housed 150 to 200 persons.
- In the current 2011 budget, Philadelphia has allocated \$501 million to Human Services which includes all social and homeless services – down 16% from the previous year.
- The Philadelphia Housing Authority is currently operating at 98% occupancy and has 100,000 families on its waiting list for either housing or federal rent subsidies.⁹

PHILADELPHIA ADVOCATES

In order to begin visualizing the socio-political and development contexts of public service architecture, the students presented their research through a series of workshops to a panel of Philadelphia homelessness agency members. This group was quick to refer to themselves as “advocates” – a term for “a supporter of a cause,” originating from Latin,

“to call to one’s aid.”¹⁰ The advocate group consisted of representatives from the City of Philadelphia, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and Project H.O.M.E.¹¹

As the discussion unfolded, a complex set of political interrelationships surfaced between the agencies. In daily interactions, all three share and complement each other in the overall task of providing social services. Homeless men and women are moved between agency facilities when over-crowding occurs, they share assignments when needs arise and cover for one another where possible. During Code Blue (extreme cold) and Code Red (extreme heat) conditions, the agencies work together to find space and services for as many of the homeless as they can coax off the street. While they all have forms of transitional housing and shelters, each caters to slightly different areas of need. The agencies, working together, comprise the primary social service safety net in the Philadelphia area.

The City of Philadelphia

The Office of Supportive Housing is Philadelphia’s agency assigned to deal with the homelessness condition. Their recently issued Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness focuses on prevention rather than emergency housing.¹² Currently, the City contracts for approximately 2,900 private organization emergency housing beds, 3,900 transitional housing beds, and over 4,200 units of permanent housing. In a recent policy shift, the City will move toward funding private non-profit organizations to provide emergency and transitional housing for the homeless rather than offering those services itself. The imminent closing of the 300 plus bed Ridge Shelter is a result of this shift. The shelter is an example of the large bulk bed facility. The strategy is to promote smaller “neighborhood” scaled facilities moving forward.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Through their Catholic Social Services division, the Archdiocese fulfills the catholic belief in charity and selflessness for the homeless through support of an umbrella of non-profit organizations located in Philadelphia and its surrounding regions. Their largest facility, St. John Hospice, is located in Center City and houses 40 full time residents, feeds 350 lunches per day to the community and provides a mail room for over 2,000 men.

Project H.O.M.E.

Formed by Sister Mary Scullion and Joan Dawson McConnon in 1989 from a number of smaller non-profit agencies, Project HOME is the largest private homelessness agency in the City. It owns, manages and supports a wide range of social service centers. It reaches into the community through three primary branches; Housing, Community Services and Education/ Employment. Project HOME currently provides 65 "Safe Haven" emergency housing beds, 145 transitional housing units and 195 permanent supported housing units.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Public service agencies fight for survival on two primary fronts: Operations and Facilities. Both fronts find sustenance from a balance of public and private sources. Operational funding tends to be short term and awarded by Federal, State and Municipal agencies on an on-going, renewal basis. For day to day operations, agencies are at the mercy of public budgets, tax bases, economic health and the political leanings of governing bodies. Social agency administrators often do not know their monetary allocations until the last minute and must plan for multiple scenarios. In 2009, a 101 day PA state budget impasse "devastated hundreds if not thousands of 501(c)(3) nonprofits that contracted with State and County agencies to provide crucial community services... (many) were forced to make the impossible choice of cutting services to the needy, laying off staff, or closing their doors altogether."¹³ Facility funding, on the other hand, tends to be long term specific allotments with completion deadlines. Development involves a dizzying array of funding sources and must be carefully planned. "Bricks and mortar" investment monies are often tiered relying on the acquisition of initial grants before successive ones can be awarded. These packages are extremely complex to compile, navigate and maintain. Unfortunately, they can crumble like a house of cards if one component fails or if deadlines are exceeded.

Small Service Projects and The Community Development Block Grant

At the heart of small scale service project funding is the Community Development Block Grant program administered by US Department of Housing and

Urban Development (HUD). The CDBG is a "flexible program providing communities with resources to address a wide range of unique community developmental needs."¹⁴ The program "works to ensure decent affordable housing, to provide services to the most vulnerable in communities, and to create jobs through the expansion and retention of businesses." Established in 1974, the program is one of the longest continuously run HUD entitlements. States allocate the funds to qualifying communities and require public participation of residents in predominately low and moderate income neighborhoods, slums or blighted areas. Usually requiring local municipal matching funds, the CDBG program is a primary tool for communities and agencies to use in development of architecture for the public good.

Unfortunately, the structure of the grants can overburden the facility development process resulting in less than ideal results. The author's own practice has completed a number of CDBG projects most recently a series of phased renovations to the historic LaMott Community Center in Elkins Park, PA, just north of Philadelphia. Owned by Cheltenham Township and originally built as a school in the mid to late 1800's, the building is located on estate of Lucretia Mott and Camp William Penn, the first Union Army training ground for African American troops during the Civil War. It is on the national register and is believed to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Center qualifies for the CDBG grant program by being in a disadvantaged community defined by the census and facility upgrades have been spread over six individual matching fund grants. Each project phase budget ranged from \$150,000 to \$175,000. Per PA State bid law, such public projects require four multiple prime contracts: General Construction, Mechanical, Electrical and Plumbing. Together with Davis Bacon Act requirements for prevailing wages, the projects require extensive paperwork including periodic update submittals, grant applications, and grant closure documentation. In the case of the LaMott Center, historic review with the PA Historical and Museum Commission was also required and by the time each of the phases were bid, the administration time equaled that spent on the architectural design. These regulations drove up the professional fees for the project as well as the cost of the eventual construction - 75% of the value compared to a private project of equal size. CDBG

projects tend to be “stop gap” methods for repairing and upgrading facilities rather than a means to develop new, more challenging solutions. Few architects are comfortable with the time consuming battle and municipalities are at the mercy of “low-bid” contactors who can provide substandard work without fear of legal challenge. If interested in the quality of public service architecture, the smaller scale CDBG provides funding but the system tends not to create compelling work.

Large Scale Public Service Projects

Larger public service architectural projects, on the other hand, offer greater opportunity for quality architecture due to the economy of scale. As monetary stakes increase, project finances must be underwritten by established entities to be eligible for greater allotments. The task of wiring together public and private tiered funding packages with long duration schedules can be daunting. For large facilities, Project HOME pulls from two federal, eight state, nine City and fourteen public and private funding sources. The public programs include HUD, Dept. of Veteran Affairs, PA Housing Funding Authority, Philadelphia Housing Trust Fund, Redevelopment Authorities, Tax Credit Equities, and general contributions from private sources including even the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Tax credit and charitable gift programs reward private contributors and are popular with banking and investment corporations. The public service slant of the investments can be used for “good guy” marketing while the tax credits offer smart financial returns.

With such extensive funding and layered regulations, the larger projects tend to be run by independent organizations able to devote full time staff while isolating liability. The non-profit corporation has become, nationwide, the primary vehicle for public service project development. Project HOME is a combination of many non-profit corporations each focused on different areas of service. The Archdiocese developed a separate non-profit Office of Community Development (OCD). The City of Philadelphia now prefers to directly fund non-profit corporations in provision of public housing and services rather than be a landlord. While non-profits are primary building block agents, they can also be fragile entities at the mercy of their own political oversight, weak funding and the leanings of governmental leaders. While non-profits qualify

for unique funding, they can have little reserves and staying power given dispute or loss of funding unless related to larger parent organizations that can offer financial stability. It is doubtful that St. John’s Hospice, as a separate non-profit, would survive without stop-gap emergency funding provided by the Archdiocese even though it is an independently run facility.

The large social service projects are certainly not without risk. A recent senior housing project for the Archdiocese OCD crashed after two years of work. An abandoned early twentieth century bank with a connected warehouse/ manufacturing space in the West Kensington neighborhood was identified as a prime development opportunity for senior housing. The OCD obtained options for the properties, assembled a financing plan with private and public funding including time sensitive grants, and hired an architecture/ engineering team to study and design the project. Heading into the final stages, the property owner decided not to sell and challenged the options. Faced with initiating legal action to consummate the agreements, it was decided to abandon the project. With the design 75% complete, the OCD is now actively pursuing similar sites that might accommodate the design. This is not an uncommon scenario. Architecture for the public good requires perseverance and incredible patience. Projects may continue for decades before coming to fruition.

With greater fees, the larger projects entice more qualified architect/ engineering teams and allow more time for design and research. Given greater critical mass, more extensive sites and a higher profile, the larger social service project has a greater chance for success and progressive exploration of the socio-political condition.

PHILAU DESIGN STUDIO PROPOSALS

Upon conclusion of the research workshops and programming, the students began design work. Ten students decided to locate projects in the Center City area of Philadelphia where the greatest concentration of the homeless population currently resides. While all proposals provided transitional housing, students added specific agencies of interest and social charges to their architectural programs including: A homeless running self esteem and health club entitled Back on My Feet; education and job training facilities; a teen

women's center; a Homeless World Cup of Soccer allied facility; a "car living" auto repair training center; a detox center; and a module housing system that residents can alter and modify as they progress with their education and integration back into society. While the Center City student work attempted to delve into the socio-political factors of public service architecture, the majority of these design proposals approached the homeless condition from a romantic aesthetic and tectonic position. Simply building a compelling design will improve the situation. Without consideration of the underlying socio-political contexts, it was difficult to criticize the solutions on anything other than a formal level.

Three students took advantage of an opportunity to work with the Archdiocese Office of Community Development on a real project in the West Kensington area of Philadelphia. Up until the mid-twentieth century, West Kensington was a stable working class neighborhood northeast of Center City Philadelphia. Over a period of two to three decades, the majority of the manufacturing and textile businesses closed or moved out of the area leaving a varied mix of factory, warehouse, mixed use and residential buildings. Complicating matters, an elevated subway runs above Kensington Avenue creating a dismal environment. Jobs have not been replaced and West Kensington is now one of the poorest areas of the city. Suffering with drugs, prostitution, homelessness and crime, the community has struggled to maintain even basic levels of stability. Given such need and despair, a plethora of social service agencies have established a presence in the area including the Archdiocese which located the OCD in a newly renovated community center at the northern edge of the neighborhood.



Figure 2. 2400 Block of Kensington Avenue

The OCD identified the 2400 block of Kensington Avenue as a prime site for a seed development and at the time of the design studio, had been working over a year on strategies. Across the street from a soup kitchen and adjacent to an elevated subway stop, the site is a varied mix of empty lots, small businesses, residences, vacant buildings and even a flop house. The OCD rightly pushes mixed-use development and believes the best solution for this project is to improve the entire block. Speculative development with space that must be leased, though, is not the best means to revitalize a neighborhood already strife with empty buildings. For the OCD, the preferred strategy is to incorporate large anchor presences in such projects alongside which smaller entities can find stability. A total block development project for a small community development corporation, though, can be quite a challenge.

For a non-profit working on a large site project such as this one, site acquisition is one of the toughest hurdles to overcome. While some community development corporations can purchase properties and hold them for later transference, most CDC's are not seen as stable enough organizations for ownership unless underwritten by larger agencies or corporations. In the case of inner city blocks with numerous parcel owners, the task of bundling properties can be extremely frustrating. Most municipalities can take possession of vacant properties via eminent domain, and Philadelphia is no exception. It takes time and administrative effort though, and as such, most CDC's are at a disadvantage. The Archdiocese has a slight advantage as members of the congregation will often transfer or leave properties to the Church. In the case of the 2400 block of Kensington Avenue, the OCD needed ammunition to ask the City to

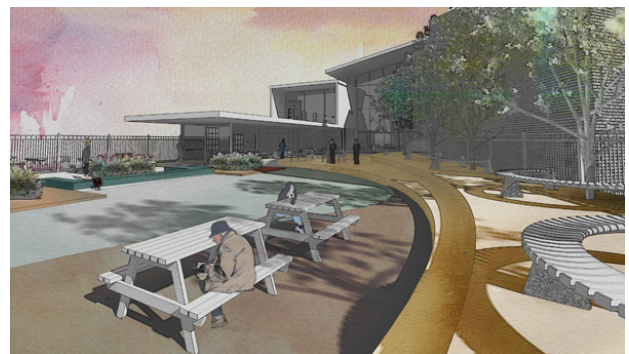


Figure 3. Darren Conlen, 2400 Block Development

acquire the vacant lots and to approach the owners of the other properties to discuss investment in the project. They asked the students for help.

Alongside the site acquisition, the eventual ownership and management of the anchor presence had to be determined to enable grant applications. Inner City Missions, a women's housing non-profit organization six blocks to the east, has been looking to expand their housing services. They agreed to act as primary property owner and operations manager for the housing component - one and two bedroom secure transitional housing for disadvantaged women and their children. The remaining properties would be held by Catholic Charities, a branch of the Archdiocese, with the intent of eventually selling the properties.

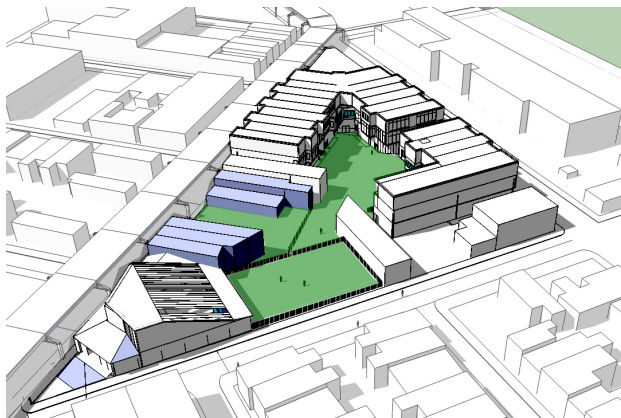


Figure 4. Tyler Mentzer 2400 Block Development

The students participated in a series of programming workshops with the OCD and Inner City Missions to explore the housing first, and opportunities for the remaining parcels of the site second. The design goal was to propose dense, mixed use development which strongly supported the street while offering secure housing and supportive business opportunities. Through the workshops, two other anchor uses became of interest and were included, HUNE and an "Island of Hope." HUNE Inc., is an existing non-profit organization established in 1998 providing "free bilingual English and Spanish training, technical and individual assistance to parents of infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and to professionals who work with children."¹⁵ The Island of Hope facility will provide a non-denominational "respite" for those on the

streets and in trouble. The three program elements together formed the core of the design proposals. Upon that foundation, each of the students added their own layer of program interests - a food bank and culinary school for the disadvantaged, a secure courtyard shared by Inner City Missions and HUNE, and a social service training facility where residents help mentor the homeless. At the conclusion of the design studio, the three students presented digital files of their work to the OCD and Inner City Missions who are now using the plans, sections, elevations, renderings, 3d models and programs for grant writing, land acquisition proposals, planning, fundraising and project awareness.



Figure 5. Ben Weber 2400 Block Development

CONCLUSION

It is easy to be critical of the state of public service architecture. If architecture expresses the values of the society from which it was created, then we must admit that public service is not a current priority. In order to better this situation, the study of architecture must take on the less glamorous, but greatly needed, public service project typology. These educational explorations must delve into the development processes which underlie its making. If this context is ignored, the solutions will simply patronize our responsibility to better the human condition.

ENDNOTES

1 Arendt, Hannah; *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1958) pp. 50-53.

- 2 Sister Mary Scullion quote from the Project HOME website, [www. Projecthome.org](http://www.Projecthome.org). All references for Project HOME in this paper are from their website unless otherwise noted.
- 3 King, Martin Luther; Highland, Jean, ED.; *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr. Selected by Coretta Scott King*. (New York: Newmarket Press. 1996) pp. 17.
- 4 Dovey, Kim. "Interview of Sandy Hirshen." *Journal of Architecture*, Vol. 35, No. 1, With People in Mind: the Architect – Teacher at Work. (New York: Blackwell Publishing. Autumn, 1981) pp. 28.
- 5 Philadelphia University College of Architecture and the Built Environment students: Valerie Becker, Darren Conlen, Shaun Hunter, Ryan Kidd, Mahwish Matih, Tyler Mentzer, Morgan Wesley, Lauren Peirzchala, Todd Rubio, Tim Rudloff, Zachary Silverman, Benjamin Weber, Stefanie Wiegand.
- 6 General homelessness demographic summations were snapshots in time as most are in a constant state of change. Many of the percentages and facts fluctuated between students as their research overlapped. Not all are source cited due to fluidity of the findings and the desire for brevity. Most of the facts were gleaned from public information websites and City of Philadelphia publications.
- 7 "The Hotel Homeless." 60 Minutes TV Program by CBS. Originally Aired January 2011.
- 8 City of Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing, *Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program*. Updated 4/28/2009. Published by the City of Philadelphia.
- 9 Lin, Jennifer; "Philadelphia Overwhelmed by the Homeless, Turning Many Away." www.philly.com. 9/15/2011.
- 10 Webster's Unabridged Dictionary.
- 11 Advocate Team Members: Roberta Cancellier; Deputy Director of Policy, Planning & Administration, City of Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing. Deborah Wagner; Administrator of Housing and Homeless Services, Catholic Social Services, Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Patricia Holland; Project HOME Vice President of Residential and Homeless Programs. Beth Lewis; Project HOME Program Director, Outreach Coordination Center. Mark Bielecki; *My Place*, Program Director, formally with Project HOME. Mary Zagar-Brown; Office of Community Development, Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Brother Joe Dudek; Office of Community Development, Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Brother Frank Vega; Director, *Inner City Missions*.
- 12 Philadelphia Center for Urban Community Services; *City of Philadelphia 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*. May 2007. Published by the City of Philadelphia.
- 13 <http://davidarossandassociates.wordpress.com/2010/05/30/budget-process-reforms-can-prevent-a-budget-impasse/>
- 14 US Dept of Housing and Community Development, (HUD); http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/communitydevelopment/programs
- 15 <http://huneinc.org/index2.htm>