Building Social Building: Public Interest Design as a Catalyst for Change

Today's most complex and variable social issues are the context within which we, as social impact architects, attempt to find a footing. This inconstant environment leaves us with more questions than answers. This paper does not offer another definition or exercise in semantics, but rather lessons learned about the social impact architecture field through a specific case study as a means to progress the discourse.

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As the field of public interest architecture struggles to define itself, parallels have been drawn with the public health field and its divergence from the field of medicine. Should a similar division be drawn between socially impactful architecture and an otherwise defined traditional practice? The public health analogy is limited in its application when specialization within each field is considered. While specialization within medicine defines education, training, and professional practice (the American Board of Medical Specialties currently certifies over 150 specialties and subspecialties[1]), specialization in the field of architecture is gained primarily through experience. Individuals and firms develop specific or broad expertise organically over the course of a career. Branding, portfolios of work, and awards indicate specific areas of expertise within the field of architecture, rather than a regulatory body. Therefore, many of the pressures that required public health to define itself as separate from the traditional field of medicine do not exist in regard to public interest architecture.

Despite this, public interest design has proclaimed itself a movement, breaking with a status quo architectural body that has been accused of serving only the wealthiest minute percentage of global citizens.[2] Students and young professionals flock to opportunities to be a part of meaningful design and construction, and the efforts of groups such as Architecture for Humanity, Habitat for Humanity, the Design Corps, and more recently, MASS Design Group, have received attention and aplomb on a global scale for their projects that prioritize the needs of a typically underserved community.

As the social impact design field has developed, a clear definition or differentiation from traditional practice has been slow to evolve. Recent attempts have made significant progress, but the imperative to prioritize specificity within public interest projects has limited the relevance of even such efforts as the Social Impact Design Summit which led to the release of the informative *Design and*

Social Impact white paper in 2013.[3] Today's most complex and variable social issues are the context within which we, as social impact architects, attempt to find a footing. This inconstant environment leaves us with more questions than answers. Can someone who is new to a place responsibly undertake public interest design? What are the proper motivations for social impact design? Who are the necessary collaborators to our work? How do we train public interest designers? How should public interest design projects be regulated, evaluated, and awarded? Understanding that these questions and the definition of public interest architecture are derived from the social issues the field strives to address, this paper does not offer another definition or exercise in semantics, but rather lessons learned about the social impact architecture field through a specific case study as a means to progress the discourse.

BAPTIST TOWN

Lessons shared here come from a social impact design effort in Baptist Town, a 100-year-old African American neighborhood located in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenwood, MS. With a rich history of Civil Rights, the Blues, and neighbors watching out for neighbors, Baptist Town residents have a strength of identity rare in the United States today. This identity has survived despite statistics of poverty that outpace those typical of similar locations within the State of Mississippi. With an estimated population of 700 people, one survey states that unemployment rates in the neighborhood in 2009 were as high as 52% and high school graduation rates as low as 27%. Further, homeowners represent 32% of the households, and 82.5% of homes were classified as substandard.[4]

The Baptist Town neighborhood revitalization is an ongoing effort led by a regional community design center (CDC). This CDC was enlisted to develop a master plan for the neighborhood, and after significant community engagement, the result primarily consisted of a large housing component, a community center, and infrastructure improvements. Funding and support from local leadership was obtained in 2011, but work continued to falter. In January of 2013, an Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellow was hired through a competitive grant process and has provided dedicated leadership toward completion of the work the community has long awaited. Once the project management gap was filled, the master plan was no longer a "study" but a tangible plan in action. The Fellow built momentum

Figure 1: *Walker Alley,* Housing stock in the Baptist Town neighborhood.

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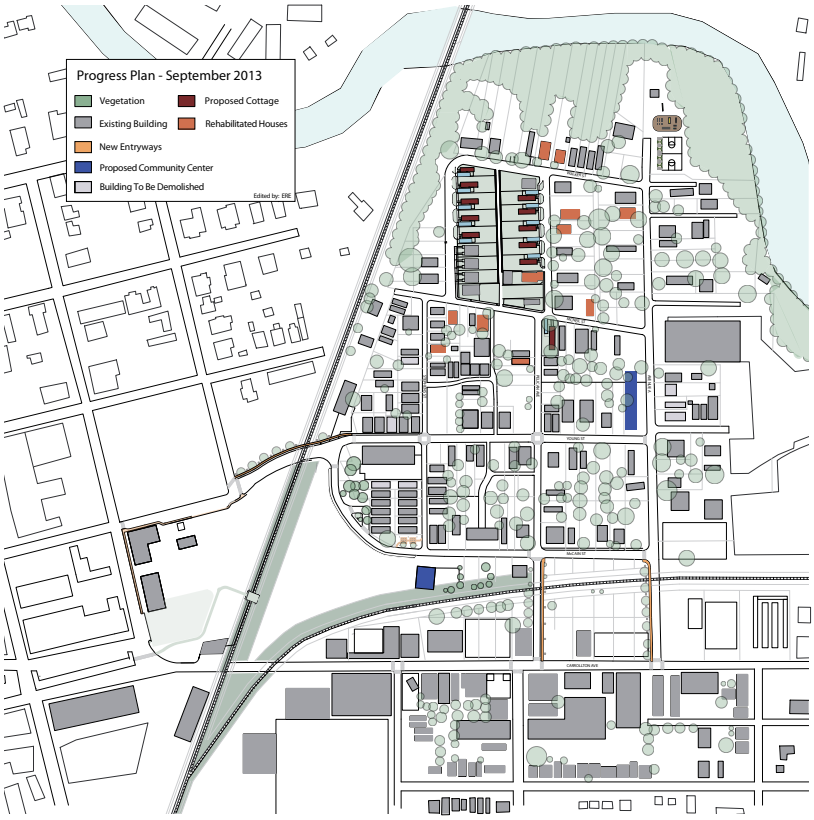

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amongst team members, community agencies, and most importantly, the Baptist Town residents. Action began to take place, and progress is visible and ongoing.

PUBLIC INTEREST ARCHITECTURE HAS TRUST ISSUES.

A paramount and defining characteristic that differentiates public interest architecture from traditional practice is the client-architect relationship. Within public interest efforts, potential user groups are frequently underserved in terms of design services, resulting in empathy gaps between architects and clients exacerbated beyond the complexities of an unfamiliar culture. In order to overcome these challenges and provide architectural responses that are indeed in the interest of the target public audience, trust must be built between the designer and the user group. These empathy gaps have not traditionally been a concern within architect-client relationships, where a project owner is seeking a building for a specific purpose and user group. In the social impact realm, designers instead begin with the question, "What is not well in this place?" Rather than working through programmatic exercises, the social impact designer begins pre-programming, building relationships and often playing many non-design roles before any design work begins. Even organizations such as the CDC, long dedicated to serving the public, have struggled at times to take the time and find the methodology that will allow the community to be honest, and give the project a chance to succeed as a driver of positive change that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

It has been the experience of the CDC, particularly within the Baptist Town project, that an individual dedicated to fostering an understanding of the community and its needs has provided the key to building trust. Early in the organization's outreach within the community, the CDC worked with a small group of neighborhood residents to site the future community center. Despite this, at a large community presentation of the proposed location of the community center, the

Figure 2: *Baptist Town Master Plan.*

crowd of residents arrived with distrust and negative impressions about the project. Through this experience, the CDC realized that though their intentions were to listen and serve the community, the relationships did not yet exist that would allow this to occur.

Over the past year, the CDC's Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellow has been dedicated to these tasks, and through both informal and formal community engagement has begun to build trust and knowledge that then informs design decisions. For example, through visiting residents at home, it was discovered that though many homes have computers, only one has internet access. This information will impact the way that computer stations, hours of operation and internet access are addressed within the community center. This understanding will also be passed along to the local job center and GED study material provider as a current barrier that could result in major educational and economic strides if removed. This critical discovery would not have been realized had the Fellow not developed trusting relationships amongst community members.

As public interest architecture strives to address global social challenges, building individual relationships is a step that cannot be skipped. This step that builds trust, and therefore accurate understanding of the issues at hand, is necessary not only on a project by project basis, but also in terms of growing the accountability of public interest architecture as a field. Too often, well-intentioned volunteer and/or student groups have been the true beneficiaries of public interest projects, gaining valuable skills and experiences themselves, yet leaving behind a product of little use, or worse, a liability, for permanent residents. Discussed at length in regard to the many social impact designers working in Hale County, the article "The Heart of Hale County" addresses one of the many questions that lies at the root of how public interest architecture will define itself. Who can be a responsible public interest designer? Should the project lead be intimately familiar with the culture and locale of the project, or can fresh ideas from "outsiders" create energy and lead to a brighter future?[5] As mentioned previously, this paper does not attempt to answer these questions, but offer lessons learned. The Fellow discussed here is not from Baptist Town, Mississippi or even the racial background of the Baptist Town residents, but personal relationships maintained on a regular basis for a continuous period of time have led to significantly increased acceptance, support and progress for this project. In pursuit of this goal, the Fellow has taken many cues from the work of Anna Heringer at the METI Handmade School in Bangladesh where Heringer also forged relationships in an unfamiliar place and then allowed those relationships to guide the project through design, construction, and operations.[6]

Though we are hopeful at the prospect of scaling up the systems and the impact of professionals within public interest architecture, it is our experience that the engagement process cannot be scaled and still provide meaningful results.

PUBLIC INTEREST ARCHITECTURE IS PUBLIC; THIS MEANS IT IS POLITICAL.

Public interest projects serve segments of the public, rather than individuals or corporations. This potential for broad impact is politicizing in itself. With the addition of questions of funding and the potential for overlap with existing government programs, these topics can prove controversial throughout the life of socially impactful projects.

Funding sources can influence the perception (and the reality) of the motives driving a project. Additionally, well-intentioned funders may enforce

unrealistic or unsuitable requirements that skew project outcomes. The empathy gap between designer and client discussed in the previous section is also a common pitfall for project administrators and funders. Specific to public interest projects, there is an added stigma related to the potential for embezzlement or misuse of funds, as well as the perception that tax dollars are involved whether this is the case or not. Evidence of the potential for embezzlement can still be seen in cases arising from the alleged misuse of federal dollars in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.[7]

An additional politicizing effect unique to the public interest sector is the potential to threaten existing government systems. The need for a socially driven building or development project can be perceived by community members and government officials as insinuating a failure on the part of that government to meet a public need. This is particularly acute in countries undergoing rapid development, and in order to avoid negative ramifications, designers must invest time in understanding the framework within which they propose to work. The lack of perceived systems or services may indicate a struggling project or municipality particularly vulnerable to being threatened by a public interest project. An example of a failure to form a respectful partnership with local government comes from a humanitarian design course taught within the architecture college of a university that wishes to remain unnamed. An NGO that was currently in the process of constructing a school with local community members partnered with this design class. The NGO had learned through trial and error the pitfalls of not working collaboratively and respectfully with local residents. These lessons were not communicated to design students who chose to develop an elementary classroom curriculum including workbooks and testing standards to be implemented by local teachers. When news of the project plans reached community leaders and teachers at the project site they were frustrated and insulted. Their school and their country have required teaching standards and guidelines that are not only required but are part of a developed system, not a 10 week class project.

Within Baptist Town, both successful integration into an existing system and the crippling effect of misconceptions about fund use have been experienced. A relationship with the local housing authority was developed prior to proposing alternative delivery solutions for the new housing component of the revitalization. Through meetings, it became clear that a local non-profit, rather than the Housing Authority, was the appropriate partner for this project. Though the housing authority is not currently a project partner, this potential future resource was not alienated or duplicated through the process. Less positive ramifications resulted from a misunderstanding of funding sources and uses within the same project. Twenty-six Katrina cottages (the carefully crafted replacements to the unhealthy FEMA trailers initially dispatched after Hurricane Katrina) were donated for use as new housing within Baptist Town. Additionally, a grant to cover the costs of transport, installation and preparing the cottages for homeowners was obtained. This grant stipulated that though only very minimal project costs would be incurred by the organization implementing the project, homes should be sold at a price that would allow them to compete with the local rental market. The resulting funds would then be reinvested in future affordable housing projects in the area. Though clearly documented and often presented, this plan left many with the impression that a windfall of cash would be available to the group implementing the project. Despite the project team's efforts, the cottage portion of the neighborhood revitalization remains on hold largely due to this misconception and subsequent politicization.

An awareness that the status of a project as public interest or socially aware does not necessarily open doors is a key understanding with which to approach this field.

SOCIAL IMPACT DESIGN EXPANDS THE WAY ARCHITECTS COLLABORATE.

Peter Aeschbacher, director of Penn State's Hamer Center for Community Design, said in a recent article, "As soon as you put in the word public, it's broader in scope than what the architecture profession is used to. As soon as we start talking about real estate development and other kinds of entrepreneurial activities, we are out of architecture."[8] Aeschbacher's comment points to the great depth and breadth of knowledge necessary to implement a project with goals such as improving health, expanding educational opportunities, or addressing quality of life through the built environment. In the past, communication among the silos of architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, and engineering were seen as breakthrough progress within the field of architecture. Today, public interest architects are forming partnerships outside of the design field. Butaro Hospital in Rwanda by MASS Design Group is an example of how public interest design can broaden its potential as a change maker. The hospital, designed primarily by students and constructed by local residents, was the result of a partnership between MASS co-founder Michael Murphy and physician and Partners In Health founder Paul Farmer. Farmer's expertise in the spread and treatment of tuberculosis was a primary design driver, impacting building layout, ventilation, and circulation.[9] By partnering with an expert in infectious disease, MASS has shown the value of an expanded definition of collaborative design.

Building upon a skill already present within the architecture community, public interest leaders must reach out to everyone from waste water services, literacy organizations, artists, and grant writers, while continuing to steer a course with a specified goal. Within Baptist Town, building informative partnerships is an ongoing process. The project team has encompassed a wide variety of professionals and students over the years, and continues to be a highly collaborative effort. Despite this shifting team, a unique characteristic of the effort has been an ongoing understanding by the CDC and others of the indispensable need to engage the community in a meaningful way. As an example of a non-traditional partnership, the local Economic Development Foundation plays a leadership role, a component that we are hopeful will add a much needed layer to the project by addressing employment and job skills issues. Despite this, a broader network still needs to be engaged. Social workers are a primary example of a potential collaborator that is yet to be engaged that could provide insights into which challenges within Baptist Town are perceived, which are real, and which have been yet to be illuminated.

Within the collaborative project team, a potential pitfall is lack of project ownership. Social impact architects with experience in project management are well-positioned to guide various partners throughout project implementation. Many partners were involved in the Baptist Town project, including the Mayor, CAO, grant writers and administrators, designers, residents, politicians, economic development leaders, and legislators, yet even with the dedicated and cooperative involvement from all parties, gaps existed within this framework that left the master plan idle. Ironically, the project needed yet another partner, a full-time project manager with a wide-ranging skill set (part community organizer, part architect, part project manager, part community liaison). Funding is rarely available to staff this position and finding someone with such a unique skill set was a difficult task. Partnered with the local Economic Development Foundation, the CDC became a

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Figure 3: Residents write what they are "good at" during Baptist Town GOODat Community Day. Planning, implementing and participating in GOODat Day is one of the ways the Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellow is building relationships with community members.

host organization for an Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellow. The Fellow acted in a capacity to strengthen all partners' roles, allowing each to focus on their individual skill set and accomplish the original goals of the project. The Fellow built momentum amongst team members, community agencies, and most importantly, the Baptist Town residents. Collaboration is key to any project, but having a person that can facilitate that collaboration amongst all parties is critical to its success.

Often, a non-profit or design firm facilitating a public interest project does not have the man-power or resources to dedicate a full-time person in this capacity to such a project. In the case of the Baptist Town project, the Fellow has been able to facilitate the necessary collaboration to move the project forward, but the ten to fifteen designers serving as Enterprise Rose Fellows throughout the United States at any given time are not enough to cause a paradigm shift. Looking to the future, public funding (such as that set aside for public defenders in the legal sector) or private dollars (contributed by entities such as Enterprise Community Partners who value public interest design) will be needed to grow the field.

SOCIAL IMPACT ARCHITECTURE MUST BE IMPACTFUL.

Questions concerning how to grow the field, fund projects and create paying jobs in this field can be addressed through demonstrating the positive impacts of public interest design projects. Tying metrics to projects will lead to an understanding of direct and indirect economic outcomes. This in turn will allow both government and private agencies to put a dollar amount toward the hard and soft costs necessary in realizing such projects. This idea is demonstrated by a long-term study of the health of residents of the landmark New York City affordable housing project Via Verde. In this study, the positive impacts of the numerous healthy initiatives undertaken within the project will be measured through a long-term comparison of the health of residents, compared to the health of individuals and families that applied unsuccessfully to live in the development.[10] Providing this information to city officials, health insurance companies, and others will illustrate the value proposition inherent in social impact architecture.

Though a formalized plan has not yet been developed for Baptist Town, the project team has done initial surveys and collected data regarding property values,

Figure 4: *Via Verde*. This innovative affordable housing complex includes many healthy initiatives including on-site apple trees captured here.

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median household incomes, and employment and graduation rates. It is hoped that the framework of the project team, along with an implementation plan, will lead to this data being collected years in the future for comparison and critique.

Placing responsibility for demonstrating the outcomes of public interest architecture within the profession also deepens the ties to the broad range of collaborators referenced in the previous section, and paves a path for students and young professionals to follow. In order to understand what metrics to track, how to properly document now and in the future, and how to tie those metrics to economic outcomes requires the engagement of professionals outside of the typical project team. From this engagement will follow investment within the field and the expansive growth that will create public interest architecture jobs for the upcoming generation of professionals.

CONCLUSION

There is often a misconception that the challenges being addressed by public interest design are age old. This is not the case. Technological and global population advances in recent decades play a significant role in creating the inequities the field addresses, as well as the availability of information about these inequities. The trajectory of the industrial revolution and unequal GDP development over the last two hundred years indicate that these problems can be solved within a reasonable time period of fifty to one hundred years.[11] Working collaboratively with a gamut of partners, public interest design has great potential to be a key player in increasing the sustainability, equity and quality of experience of the built environment around the globe. But as with any attempt at improvement, we must continually be checking that we are moving in the right direction. With this proof in hand, the mechanisms for funding the field, both projects and payrolls, will fall into place.

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