

# Designers, Citizens, and Citizen-Designers

Charting new modes of engagement, collaboration, and project outcomes at Tulane City Center.

## THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

Architecture has become steadily more entrenched in a classic client-provider market-driven relationship, a set of roles that has increasingly marginalized the architect and our role as designers of a better built environment<sup>1</sup>. At Tulane City Center, we are working to expand the role of designers and the impact of good design in our home, New Orleans, by creating space for more voices in the design process. We act on the belief that all citizens are impacted by our built environment and should be empowered to participate in the decisions that shape it. We use the design process as a powerful coalition building tool and our role in many projects extends beyond architecture to diplomacy, education, and facilitation<sup>2</sup>. Through this process we are also able to prove the value of design excellence in our city and shift conventions (both in perception, and reality) around who architects serve and what they work on. We live in a city which suffered a large flood, and endured subsequent years of planning meetings and charrettes which 10 years later have produced few built outcomes<sup>3</sup>. As frustrated citizens and designers we've focused our energies on deeper, more productive forms of engagement in the process of designing, and on tangible outcomes—a goal that often forces us to wear different hats to ensure a project is well executed. In short, Tulane City Center brings together creative makers and doers, working for a better city. We advance community-driven ideas through collaboration, design education, and scrappy problem-solving.

Through this article we aim to explain, by way of three case study projects, what this deeper process of engagement entails and what results from the process<sup>4</sup>. These three case study projects are examples of engagement as an integral component of design process, the shared goals that emerge from this engagement, and the shifting roles we as designers take on within coalitions to deliver a meaningful project. Although we are based within a school of Architecture, often through engagement we discover that a building is not the best solution to issues facing a community. We have the opportunity that professional firms often do not, to offer, as design professionals, a method of problem solving, diplomacy, and coalition building. The projects outlined in this article underscore the role of design as a form of Legitimization (Transitional Space's Parisite Skatepark), Education (the Lower Nine Vision Coalition), and Instigation (MACCNO's Street Performance Guide).

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Each of these projects is an example of the bottom up process typical of our work but contrary to the traditional top-down projects executed by those in a position of financial or political power. Many recent national events have underscored the disillusionment, injustices, and inequities that result when decisions impacting the broader public are made by an elite homogeneous few. As a profession we are still working to rise to the well known challenge that civil rights leader Whitney Young delivered to the national AIA convention in 1968 when he stated:

“You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I am sure this does not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance... it took a great deal of skill and creativity and imagination to build the kind of situation we have, and it is going to take skill and imagination and creativity to change it.”

And while our projects are not constructing public housing or rewriting criminal justice policies, we strive to create and promote processes and systems that ensure stakeholders have a voice and are held up as the experts about their communities working alongside the technical consultants and professionals who as a coalition vision and execute projects. We believe these processes set the stage for expanded, multimodal impacts, long after the scope of our design work is complete. Our projects are selected through an annual juried Request for Proposals. Through this process we are able to understand the needs, ideas, and opportunities identified by community groups and non-profit organizations, rather than imposing our ideas of what the community needs. Each jury consists of community members, past project partners, students, and faculty members to review and rank proposals. This is a first step in ensuring that the work is grounded in an actual need or desire from our community, and helps to build trust at the very onset of a project.



1

Figure 1: LOOP (Louisiana Outdoors Outreach Program) Pavilion, project of the 2013 TCC|Build studio, *Photo by David Armentor*

We must also acknowledge the context of the emerging Public Interest Design field we work in. We benefit from incredible work of our peer institutions<sup>5</sup> by participating in open dialogue about process, funding, and local power dynamics. This community of leaders acknowledges that we all are building on the community engagement work of our predecessors, borrowing and improving the good, and reworking the bad<sup>6</sup>. And yet, there is a competitiveness

and territorialism that results from third party funding currently required to sustain Public Interest Design work, that inhibits critical discussion about failure and open sharing of opportunities for support. In addition, there are parallel local dynamics at play when our Center, backed by a private academic institution that holds political, financial, and social power, works with traditionally marginalized communities.



2

## ENGAGEMENT

“Community collaboration is facilitated by the continuity of relationships over time, building trust and mutual understanding between practitioners and community members. Community participation has been shown to improve the project outcomes and a project’s financial viability. And importantly, participation can support community empowerment; that is, the ability of the community to act of its own behalf in present and future projects.”<sup>7</sup>

All citizens are impacted by our built environment and should be empowered to participate in the decisions that shape it. Participatory practices such as ours are attempting to address these inequities and promote social justice in the built environment. The under-served communities we work with have been historically excluded from conversations yet hold important knowledge of the assets, opportunities, and local histories that bolster the effectiveness of a project and empower those in the conversation to continue to work for a better city. Often in projects involving participatory practices there is a perception that Architecture is a passive vehicle for community desires, or that collaboration results in mediocrity. We believe in the value and power of design excellence, and are proving that design innovation and robust engagement can combine to produce outcomes which are useful, beautiful, empowering, and greater than the sum of its parts. In each project’s engagement process we are working to build the capacity of our partner organization while also educating students and stakeholders alike.

At its very basic realization, our engagement involves a few key steps including: understanding what the community wants to achieve, determining the most productive way we can insert ourselves into the process, opening up the conversation to a vast network of collaborators and consultants, executing the project as a team, and celebrating as a team <sup>8</sup>

Before we embark on a project there are several questions we ask ourselves, and we work with the partner organization or community group who proposed the project to answer these initial questions:

- What is the primary thing we are trying to do?
- How will we measure this project’s success?
- Who are the stakeholders in this project, and what are the most effective

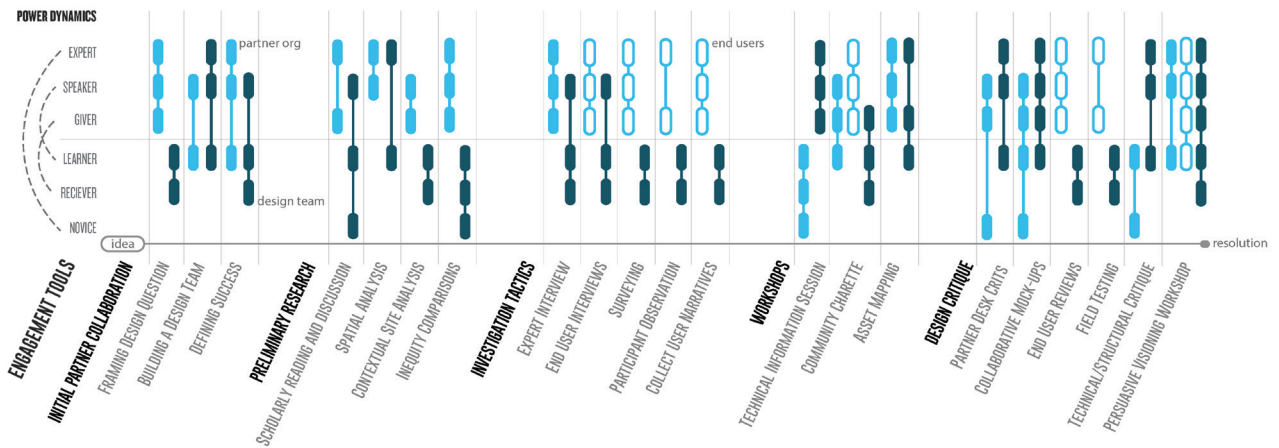
Figure 2: Sankofa Mobile Fresh Stop: Framing Design Questions (left) and resulting project (right), Photos: Tulane City Center



methods of engagement? • How can we build capacity within our community? • What are the student learning objectives? • Are there readings the partner organization would recommend to frame the design investigation? • How are we educating the public and expanding knowledge about the issues for New Orleans citizens? • At the project's conclusion, how will we celebrate? •

Framing these questions for ourselves, with our partner organization and with our students, allows us to arrive at a set of common, achievable goals for the project, set clear expectations, and quickly lay the groundwork for our team. These questions strive to answer our scoping questions as we work toward three goals: an appropriate design product (object, space, tool), a stronger coalition for advocacy (organizational capacity) and education of young designers (a Public Interest Design experience for students).

What results from the process of answering these initial questions is a robust discussion about how to engage, who to engage, nuances of who is represented, who represents, and the history of everyone's interrelationships. Once the table is set, the next question is what structure for engagement and design critique will yield the most constructive input and the most meaningful design solution. Many of us in the Public Interest Design realm rely on similar processes for engagement and have been working to refine and teach these models to others. Below is a chart of several engagement methods broken out by project phases to which they are typically appropriate, and overlays information about the power dynamics set up by different methods of engagement. Each project's process is tailored to the goals and impacts identified in answering the initial project questions. It is important to note that our engagement process is embedded within our design process, in contrast to more typical engagement that happens before and after design work. This 'engaged design process' builds on the expertise of participants and designers, and aims to build capacity in the community partner, inform a more thoughtful design result, and build momentum toward enacting the design as a team. The design process becomes a tool for empowerment by valuing and highlighting the specific expertise of the project stakeholders.



3

### CASE STUDIES

#### PARISITE SKATEPARK<sup>9</sup>: DESIGN AS LEGITIMIZATION

Parisite Skatepark (named after its proximity to Paris Ave.) was started by a group of skaters who took advantage of the vacant, under-utilized space beneath the I-610 overpass by

Figure 3: Power dynamics shifting in TCC's engaged design process

building a D-I-Y skatepark. With no official skatepark in a city of 380,000 people, local youth collected money and materials to make skateable quickrete additions on nights and weekends to their 'squatter site'. With growing popularity, this informal public space drew the attention of city officials who questioned the legal implications of operating such a recreational space. Around the time when the city threatened to take bulldozers this spontaneous urban space the skate community banded together under the name of Transitional Spaces, initiated paperwork to be an official Louisiana nonprofit corporation, and reached out to Tulane City Center for help formalizing the skatepark.



4

**Engagement:** Our involvement was a 20-month process that began with a series of community charrettes. The invited 'community' was a combination of users (skaters) and nearby residents. To supplement the charrettes, which were largely conversations in plan, the students built a sectional model of the interstitial space under the interstate and brought clay to the meetings to encourage the community of collaborators to work through and suggest ideas in a more intuitive way. As the city became more engaged in the process of legitimizing the skatepark TCC also participated in a series of City hosted information sessions at a nearby Recreation Center where a broader range of citizens were in attendance and had a chance to ask questions and voice concerns. Present at that session was a mixture of concerned citizens, skaters, parents of skaters, and local press.

Once the project plans were approved by the City's Design Review Board, the Recreation Department, and the State Department of Transportation (a permitting hurdle that was necessary due to the under-interstate location of the park), the design team began constructing full scale prototypes of the benches and bike-racks for 'field testing'. During construction, engagement took place through a series of volunteer work days, and finally a city hosted opening celebration.

**TCC's Role:** TCC's partnership helped to legitimize the efforts of the young skate community, whose work to date was perceived by the risk-averse city officials to be a mix of anarchy and tactical urbanism. TCC coordinated a capacity building session for the fledgling non-profit and connected Parisite with legal, engineering, and other professional support necessary to gain approval for what existed on site, and to grow Parisite into a fully operational public space. A master plan charted a process for future construction phases on site. A TCC design build studio and subsequent seminar course designed and constructed the park's entryway, seating, bike racks, signage, and 2,500 square feet of rain-water retention gardens in our flood-prone city<sup>10</sup>.

**Conflict:** The project site's under-interstate location necessitated multiple layers of approval (state, city and federal). This was TCC's first project with the city government, and issues of trust, liability, and bureaucratic process proved to be more challenging than imagined.

Figure 4: Parisite Skatepark, project of the 2014 TCC|Build seminar: Technical Information Session (left) and resulting skatepark entry (right), Photos by TCC (left) and Michael Lee Wong (right)

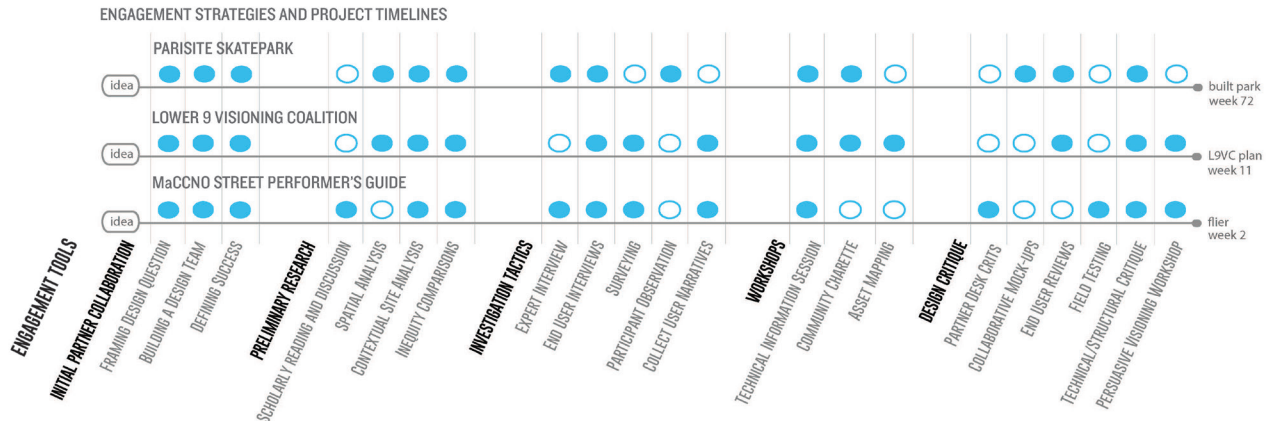


Figure 5: Engagement strategies between projects. The three case studies addressed very different design goals, scales, timelines and modes of engagement.

However, throughout the prolonged process we mapped out steps that Transitional Spaces can use for future development on site. In the end, TCC was able to step in at a critical moment to help bolster a young non-profit and navigate the complexities and layers of regulation involved in working with city government. Though long and complex, the process that started with the threat of bulldozers ended with an official ribbon cutting by the city's Mayor, Mitch Landrieu.

### LOWER NINE VISION COALITION<sup>11</sup>: DESIGN AS EDUCATION

In the summer of 2013, the Holy Cross Neighborhood Association approached Tulane City Center to bring together various community groups in the formation of the L9 Vision Coalition (L9VC). The group formed in response to development proposals for the former Holy Cross School site, one of the largest undeveloped high ground parcels in the city and likely to have a major impact on the entire Lower Ninth Ward. Each proposal raised multiple concerns of scale and character for neighborhood residents. TCC worked to create three planning schemes representing the wishes of the whole neighborhood, providing technical expertise to ensure realistic and financially feasible plans. Through this support, TCC enabled neighborhood leaders to promote their community's vision for the site and worked with the current developer to ensure that community needs were considered. The planning process and capacity building led by TCC has enabled the community to confront development challenges as their community grows.

**Engagement:** Through this planning work, TCC helped to develop a new group called the L9VC. Named and organized to encompass the entire Lower Ninth Ward, the group gathered a broad coalition of individuals and neighborhood organizations (L9 Homeowners Association, Lower 9th Ward Village, A Community Voice, Holy Cross Neighborhood Association, L9 Center for the Arts, Art House on the Levee, and others). Using comprehensive outreach and five public meetings in two months, TCC brought urban design, preservation, development financing, and landscape design expertise through educational workshops. The process gave the community a voice and informed their position with realistic budgeting, and ultimately convinced the developer to make a number of changes, including a reduction from 13 stories to 5, and assured community access to existing green spaces.

**TCC's Role:** TCC facilitated conversations around these difficult issues and offered information through the lenses of preservation, financing, and design to foster a more productive dialogue. TCC documented the dialogues through charrette techniques of sketching, mapping, and brainstorm lists. Paired with teach-ins, the ideas generated were grounded in informed conversations about the multiple issues of development for neighborhoods and developers. We believe that better design solutions emerge from meaningful dialogues with those

### ENDNOTES

1. "Conventional architectural practice depends upon clients to pay for needed professional services, thus limiting the architect's obligation to address public needs unmet by the private market. Much of the work of public interest design practices is to figure out ways to serve people who cannot afford the services of our profession and to address systemic problems in the built environment that create the needs in the first place. In other words, the transformation of architectural practice to a more public interest model can be seen as a wide-spread response to the nagging concern that the conventional model of practice responds solely to the paying client, thus limiting the profession's capacity to address the problems of our time."—Roberta M Feldman, Sergio Palleroni, David Perkes, and Bryan Bell, *Wisdom from the Field: Public Interest Architecture in Practice: A Guide to Public Interest Practices in Architecture.*, 2011 Latrobe Prize Report; AIA College of Fellows
2. "I do not believe that courage has gone out of the profession, but we tend to be narrow in the scope of our thinking and underestimate our natural capacity to be subversive leaders and teachers. In other words, the more we practice, the more restricted we become in our critical thinking and our lifestyles. Critical thought requires looking beyond architecture towards an enhanced understanding of the whole to which it belongs. Accordingly, the role of architecture should be placed in relation to other issues of education, healthcare, transportation, recreation, law enforcement, employment, the environment, the collective community that impacts on the lives of both the rich and the poor."—Sam Mockbee from an essay in Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till, editors, *Architectural Design: The Everyday and Architecture* (Academy Press, 1998)

who are impacted, and that deeper understanding of the multiple issues at play in decisions allow space for conversations about the true points of contention and possible solutions. This project offers one example of how access to education about the multiple issues that shape our built environment can empower neighborhood groups and support more productive dialogue.

**Conflict:** This was a contentious project, responding to a developer’s proposal, done within a charged atmosphere that required sensitivity and quick response. These are challenging circumstances for thoughtful exchange and learning. Additionally, our status as the community design center of an ‘established power’ (Tulane) meant that we had to work to gain the trust of the community initially and work carefully to inform and build capacity within the L9VC without inadvertently throwing our university into a political battle against a powerful developer. The site remains a contested space with a lawsuit currently pending.

The planning exercise and educational workshops gave the community a voice and informed their position. The formation of the L9VC, which ties together a number of other L9 entities that previously had not worked in partnership, has allowed the community to confront and influence other development projects in their neighborhood, including a new school, recreation center, and expansion of the industrial canal.

### GUIDE TO NEW ORLEANS STREET PERFORMANCE<sup>12</sup>: DESIGN AS INSTIGATION

The Music and Culture Coalition of New Orleans (MaCCNO) emerged as a grassroots collective out of a meeting called by trumpeter and venue owner Kermit Ruffins to address a series of crackdowns on small music venues. Over several years, the group emerged as a significant player in local policy circles, working to monitor transparency and cultural interests in the development of a city-wide noise ordinance and comprehensive zoning ordinance as well as advocating for individual venues and a right to the city for street musicians. MaCCNO has remained heavily involved in shaping more music friendly policy and enforcement; recognizing that one of the key challenges was a broad perception that there was no regulation currently in place, and confusion as to which regulations applied where and to whom. MaCCNO’s expertise and the complexity of the spatial and cultural issues at play here offered a good opportunity to pilot a new project stream focused on infographics, in an intensive 2-week pilot.

**Engagement:** Design work began with a series of expert interviews, and was followed, in the same day with two group interviews of musicians representing the brass band and street musician communities. These discussions changed the shape of the project considerably, prompting a brainstorming session with MaCCNO leadership as to the scope and focus of the final work. The work was redirected from an overarching examination of the noise ordinance to a deeper dive into the regulations and key aspects of street performance in downtown New Orleans<sup>13</sup>. To expand on this, TCC took to the streets of the French Quarter, spending several nights conducting interviews with street musicians and establishing that a lack of knowledge about regulations on space and volume was a broader problem.

After an initial round of legal research and design, MaCCNO and key participants from the initial interviews were brought in to review a draft of a pocket-size graphic guide<sup>14</sup>. Another review with representatives from the Mayor’s Office of Cultural Economy brought clarification of several pending changes, and added legitimacy to the process. A final charrette at an area venue drew musicians, performers, activists and attorneys for additional feedback.

**TCC’s role:** In supporting MaCCNO’s advocacy work through this project, TCC’s role was to create an accurate, accessible tool that was neutral in content and tone, but supported instigation as a part of a broader strategy for making change. TCC’s fresh perspective and graphic representation helped to highlight critical issues to clarify and resulted in a visual tool that

3. In addition to the divisive Urban Land Institute’s “Strategy for Rebuilding New Orleans”, a Brief overview of 6 additional planning reports produced in the last 10 years can be found at <http://www.nola.gov/resilience/pr/>
4. TCC balances a responsibility to our partner organizations with a responsibility for educating young designers. This paper will focus on the impacts of our engaged design process for our partner organizations.
5. To learn more, start with Design Futures; a student leadership forum and resource, Structures for Inclusion Conference, SEED Network, Association for Community Design and ImpactDesignHub.org. A quick and compelling primer on design and equity topics by a collection of practitioners visit <http://www.designforequity.org/blog>
6. “The humanitarian design movement engages working class and poor clients through charettes, workshops, and other methods of collaboration common to professional architecture and design firms. The fact of participation or inclusion, however, does not always equal meaningful power. In some instances, these rituals of participation, in fact, conceal substantive inequalities governing interactions between metropolitan design professionals and Third World denizens”.—Cedric G Johnson, “The Urban Precariat, Neoliberalization, and the Soft Power of Humanitarian Design,” *Journal of Developing Societies* 27, 3&4 (2011): 462
7. Feldman et al., *Wisdom From the Field*



8. "Civic engagement is the open and ongoing two-way dialogue between all stakeholders—essentially, people working together and talking together to move forward together...as leaders in this particular type of process, it was our responsibility to synthesize this knowledge exchange versus dictating specific knowledge, ideas or solutions"—Dan Pitera, "Leading from the Side; Leadership, Civic Engagement and the Built Environment," *Syncopating the Urban Landscape; More People, More Programs More Geographies*. Detroit Collaborative Design Center, April 2014
9. Masterplanning, and design and construction of Phase 1, of Parasite Skatepark was a collaboration of Transitional Spaces, Tulane City Center, the New Orleans Recreation Department, and Tulane School of Architecture students, with support from the Surdna Foundation and Johnson Controls Incorporated.
10. The design/build portions of Parasite Skatepark project were run as coursework through the School of Architecture. Design Build pedagogy is a topic that could fill an entirely new ACSA paper, and there are several of these that exist. In short, one of our primary objectives in many of our TCC design build projects can be summed up by Sam Mockbee's quote: "Our mission is to get these architecture students out to deal with the social and physical issues of a community... the fact that we end up building houses, that is the homework." from Bryan Bell, editor, *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003)
11. Masterplanning and outreach for the community driven plan for the former Holy Cross School site was a collaboration of the L9 Vision Coalition, Tulane City Center and Tulane School of Architecture students, with support from the Surdna Foundation and Johnson Controls Incorporated.
12. *The Guide to New Orleans Street Performance in the French Quarter and the Marigny* was a collaboration of the Music and Culture Coalition of New Orleans, Tulane City Center and Tulane School of Architecture students with support from the Surdna Foundation..
13. "What is needed is an architecture of change—an architecture that moves the field beyond the design of buildings and toward the design of new processes of engagement with the political forces that shape theories, practices, academies, policies and communities."—José L.S. Gamez, & Susan Rogers, "An Architecture of Change" In B. Bell & K. Wakeford, eds, *Expanding architecture: Design as Activism* (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008): 21
14. The graphic advocacy design outcome in the MaCCNO project was based on similar projects by the Center for Urban Pedagogy. Their director, Christine Gaspar says "I see design as a tool of power, and that we as designers have the opportunity to dislocate or relocate that power. We can put that power in the hands of communities and help them use it.... CUP...[is] helping communities have these visualization tools that they can then use to advocate for themselves". —from Feldman et al., *Wisdom From the Field*, 61.

challenged perceptions of lawlessness through an examination of the many regulations in effect. As MaCCNO approaches the next phase of negotiations toward establishing an office of sound management within the Department of Health, they have used the Guide as a point of reference for musicians and lawmakers alike .

**Conflict:** A key challenge, especially in this limited timeframe, was determining who should be engaged as measured against who could be reached. Outreach to residents and businesses in the downtown area would have been ideal, as would interviews with the various enforcement bodies.

## IN CONCLUSION

We can do better. We can be more relevant. To do so we need to invite more people to the discussion, and use our skills as problem solvers to best serve the project.

Seeing a project from idea to completion is a long, difficult, and joyful struggle that takes a team to accomplish; and to gain the trust of that community, that team, you must take the time to be a part of it. Impact is also related to the level of trust you establish in a community. Being part of that community for an extended period of time is important. This is not an international design project where we swoop in, design, and leave. This is our home, our community and we participate as members of that community through the application of our talents and training, as well as through our commitment to our fellow community members. We are here to take the calls when there's a problem with the building, or a client wants us there in city hall to help plead their case, or there is a wedding, or a birth, or a crawfish boil. Put more succinctly by Rob Corser in his article *Design in the Public Interest—The Dilemma of Professionalism*:

"We need to explore, document, and share fresh approaches to design in the pursuit of greater social good, both in academia and in commercial practice. If design continues to be construed too narrowly as merely the creation of objects, no matter how beautiful or well functioning, then the status quo of misaligned priorities, social isolation, and cultural misunderstanding will be perpetuated. If, however, designers engage in a critical re-working of the design process itself, by exploring more effective ways to work collaboratively and embed their work within the richness of their various communities, then the greater public good might truly be served."