

From Settlement House to 20K House: Service and Labor in American Design/Build Education

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This paper discusses how social engagement in the architectural profession fits within broader conceptions of American citizenship over the course of the twentieth century. To do so, it provides a historical account of American service learning in the Progressive and Depression Eras (1890s-1930s) and compares it to community-based design/build education unfolding in the current era (1990s-present). In so doing, it points out the ways in which educators in each period took a “pragmatist” approach to aiding the poor while promoting the involvement of youth in service learning activities. It argues that contemporary programs carry forward one of the key contradictions of the Progressive youth-labor model. Namely, they create a division between those who must perform hard labor to support themselves and their families and those with the privilege of temporarily laboring for educational purposes. It concludes by pointing out how student design/build efforts use the tropes of “the frontier” and “self-help” to reaffirming the profession’s value in times of social and economic crisis.

BUILDING CITIZENS: VOLUNTARY WORK PROGRAMS IN FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The decade before World War II saw the rise of a large number of progressive educational experiments. Education labeled “progressive” distinguished itself from European models of the nineteenth century, which used classical pedagogy to prepare students for work in an academic context. Instead, progressive educators felt individualized curricula and learning-by-doing should be the basis of an education for democratic living. John Dewey was one key influence for creative, non-traditional thinking about the role of education in social change. He argued that self-directed learning would produce students capable of pursuing progressive and democratic ideals.¹

Experimental schools such as Sarah Lawrence, Bennington and Black Mountain College opened their doors in the early 1930s, while traditional colleges, including Goddard and Antioch Colleges, recast themselves as progressive learning communities.² While these schools shared the objective of promoting “individuality, direct experience, serious interest, initiative, creative and independent work, and self-dependence,” each interpreted the call in its own way.³ Antioch, for example, pioneered work-study programs that integrated hands-on learning and book learning while others, like Saint John’s College, focused on self-realization through individualized but still highly intellectual programs of study. Education became a realm in which Americans could experiment with different visions of American society, posed as critiques of an existing system that they felt had gone off course.

Meanwhile, an emerging class of urban experts argued that the scientific management of public health and cities would lead to better living conditions for all Americans, rich and poor.⁴ Overcrowding and visible poverty became a source of interest for urban elites and religious organizations. Groups of upper-class women involved in the Protestant volunteer movement waged a battle for individuals’ souls and for the stability of society. Settlement houses and charity organizations established outposts in poor areas and worked towards health and education reform in the close quarters of immigrant and migrant neighborhoods.⁵

During the 1920s, elites interested in social progress began to promote voluntary youth work camps. These were short-term work programs in which youth of all classes and backgrounds came together to contribute physical labor to those less privileged than themselves. Financially stable youth would often pay a small fee for the privilege of short-term labor. In exchange, they would gain what Dewey termed “experiential learning.”

In 1933 the Quaker organization, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), ran the nation’s first voluntary work camps.⁶ AFSC youth programs began in earnest during World War I as a form of service acceptable for conscientious objectors. The Quakers were likely inspired by work camps already underway in Europe in the inter-war period, where leaders felt that youth camps might aid in fighting both communist and fascist extremism.⁷ Adapting the German model in which youth learned traditional folk songs and were encouraged to interact with laborers and craftspeople, the American camps stressed contemplation and interactions across race and class.



Figure 1. (a) Poster advertising the Works Progress Administration, United States, 1933, Source: Library of Congress; (b) Brochure for Work Camps for America, a collection of voluntary service learning opportunities (Not dated, likely 1940-1944), Source: Western Regional Archives. Note the wagons and cowboy imagery that reflect a reference to the pioneer ethic. The heroic figure, usually white and male, with shovel or hammer in hand, constitutes a key trope for organizing thinking around youth volunteerism.

Eleanor Roosevelt and a group of other committed progressive leaders advocated for the need for more voluntary youth work programs in America. They formed a loose coalition of religious and settlement house work camps into the national organization known as Work Camps for America (FIG. 1). Through the magazine *Work*, they shared information, opportunities and models.⁸ A brochure from the early 1940s advertising summer work camps, describes their mission as follows,

[T]o provide young men and women with an opportunity to do useful work and to study social issues from personal experience, to encourage a deeper individual concern for the general welfare of the nation, to enlist their wholehearted support for a democracy responsive to the needs of its citizens, to promote mutual understanding among diverse economic, religious, and social groups, and to aid youth in the discovery of a personal philosophy and a social idealism which will help to carry them through the stormy period ahead.⁹

Though the camps varied from organization to organization, most paired physical labor — such as assisting in the construction of homes and roads in a struggling mining town in rural Pennsylvania — with discussion and learning about the structural causes of poverty and unemployment. Mining towns in Appalachia, farming belts in rural Alabama and

overcrowded “ghettos” became sites for youth to express their democratic character through physical labor.

The association of each camp with new and hopeful experiments in community rebuilding relate the experience to the pioneer tradition in American life . . . Work is the basis of the summer’s experience . . . The campers participation in hard physical work has a double value. It increases the facilities available for community development. It gives campers insight into the problems associated with unskilled and semi-skilled labor.¹⁰

In this model, engagement in hard physical labor and encounters with people different than themselves became educational opportunities. Referring to “the pioneer tradition in American life,” young Americans were to venture into new territories of poverty and racial disadvantage. In so doing, advocates hoped voluntary work camps would help develop a national citizenry who understood the value of work and who could relate to the common man.

The federal government eventually supported these efforts through the National Youth Administration (NYA). The NYA was founded in 1936 under the auspices of the Work Progress Administration. Similar to today’s AmeriCorps VISTA program, it offered part-time employment to young men and women in school and included an educational component.¹¹ While other WPA work programs provided employment to otherwise desperately unemployed Americans, the NYA served a more ideological role. These programs, it was argued, would produce citizens who could lead the country towards a more promising and democratic future.¹² Like other voluntary youth work camps, the NYA maintained a division between those laboring out of desperate need and a privileged class who could labor for the “experience.”

During this period, architectural educators were also searching for a new direction appropriate to the nation's changing economy and political culture. During the nineteenth century, the American architectural establishment had absorbed European models and values, including Beaux-Arts curricula focused on the application of historical precedent to specific program types. The European "grand tour," in which Americans traveled to Europe's major architectural monuments, was one primary way of acquiring professional knowledge.

As modernist ideas entered the American context in the 1920s, American educators combined Bauhaus and other European models with insights of progressive education to form new models of architectural education. Joseph Hudnut, dean of Columbia University and later the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD), was one major figure in this transition. Hudnut was interested in introducing more pragmatic educational methods to the American architectural academy. During his tenure, the GSD's curriculum transitioned from a Beaux-Arts atelier-based model focused on the mastery of historic styles to Bauhaus-inspired studios that explored technological advancements and novel design solutions for contemporary programs. Many other schools soon followed suit.

Beyond the general trend towards modernist-inspired curricula in architecture schools, a number of educational leaders conducted pedagogical experiments focused on America's unique strengths and challenges. These experiments were influenced both by progressive education philosophy and by the conditions of the depression and the brewing European conflict. For example, in 1939, William Frank Hitchens engaged in a nationwide search to find an appropriate expert to help reorient the curriculum at Carnegie Technical University, "putting new emphasis on American architecture's Depression child—housing."¹³ For the task, he found A. Lawrence Kocher, a well-known modernist architect, historian and preservationist who was famous for his research on prefabrication and his design of the Aluminaire House. Under Kocher's direction, Carnegie Tech students built small model homes to investigate the possibility of prefabricated materials and low-cost housing designs (FIG 2a). Hitchens and Kocher saw the program as a way to bolster professional relevancy by combining American handcraft traditions with the nation's growing industrial capacities. Kocher later went on to run an extensive design/build program at Black Mountain College in rural North Carolina.

In a parallel vein, Frank Lloyd Wright directed his students on construction projects at Taliesin and on the campus of Florida Southern College (FIG 2b).¹⁴ Wright was interested in how architects could craft an American style suited to the nation's history and values. Unlike Carnegie Technical and other schools focused on prefabrication and modern materials, Wright's designs used handwork to build unique and specific aesthetic creations adapted to particular regions' climatic and cultural conditions.¹⁵

Learning-by-doing and the deployment of manual labor as a strategy for character building and citizen-making also had a precedent in America's all-black colleges. Institutions including Hampton Institute and Claflin University were founded at the turn of the century with the support of white philanthropists, including the Rockefeller and Carnegie Foundations.¹⁶ Most famous among these was Booker T. Washington's

Tuskegee Institute, founded in 1881. Located in Tuskegee, Alabama, the Tuskegee Institute trained African Americans in handcrafts and useful trades. Washington and his resident architect, Robert Robinson Taylor, felt that technical training paired with moral, religious and intellectual education would ultimately contribute to racial uplift.¹⁷ Students at Tuskegee not only physically constructed buildings designed by Taylor on their own campus (FIG. 2c), but also designed and helped construct thousands of country schools in the rural South.¹⁸

While it is unlikely that predominantly white schools like Carnegie Tech modeled themselves directly on these pioneering efforts (at least not consciously), black and white institutions both took inspiration from the same source: progressive thinking that believed hands-on learning could encourage self-reliance and good character in students.¹⁹ Yet, as with the division between WPA and voluntary youth work programs, the visions of labor practiced in white and black educational institutions diverged. While white architects labored at building houses to learn lessons they could ultimately take into professional practice, Tuskegee taught black students to be laborers. The goal was to rehabilitate the black race's reputation in the eyes of white society through hard work. Thus, the ameliorative effects of labor remained a high segregated concept.

Ultimately, the architectural profession and its intellectual and educational methods adapted to the unique requirements of a moment shaped by the challenges of prolonged depression and war. In practice, this meant a temporary shift to interest in low-cost housing. In academic institutions, this meant the search for an American tradition of building and living, and experiments with learning-by-doing and building by hand. In these realms, the profession responded to the ethical dictates associated with the value of physical labor and the importance of connecting all Americans to the project of building a better, stronger and more independent nation. Yet, these developments maintained a number of unacknowledged exclusions that still trouble community-based design/build programs today.

CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITY DESIGN/BUILD EDUCATION AND THE CITIZEN ARCHITECT

Since the early 2000s, the landscape of labor in the United States has gradually shifted. A larger percentage of jobs have moved from the manufacturing to the service sector and informal labor and self-employment have become a new standard for both the lower and middle classes.²⁰ Cycles of boom and bust associated with financial speculation, including the 2008 recession, have made architects newly aware of their vulnerability in this new economy.²² To add to this, racially charged police shootings, violence and protests have shaken many Americans' faith in the nation's legal and justice systems. In addition, natural and man-made disasters have devastated cities at home and abroad.²³ This combination of events, along with emerging social movements such as the 99% campaign and Black Lives Matter movement have provoked debates about the profession's core values.

As a result, the profession has experienced an uptick in interest in architectural work with expressly social intent. This has been a polyvalent effort, responding to a number of local, national and global conditions. Traditional centers of architectural knowledge production — universities,



Figure 2. (a) Students at Carnegie Technical construct a demonstration house on campus, 1938, Source: *Pittsburg Bulletin Index* courtesy Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh; (b) Construction crew working on Anne Pfeiffer Chapel, circa 1938. Frank Lloyd Wright personally supervised the building of Pfeiffer Chapel, which was done in part by Florida Southern College students. Source: Special Collections, Florida Southern College Library, Lakeland, Florida.²¹ (c) Students at Tuskegee Institute construct a building on their campus, early 1900s. Source: Library of Congress.

museums and architectural presses — have recently begun to support “activist” agendas emerging from grassroots and professional spheres.²⁴ Additionally, new spaces of knowledge production have also emerged, including non-profit design advocacy groups and partnerships between corporations and social designers.²⁵ In a document titled *Wisdom from the Field* (2012) a group of architects sponsored by Harvard’s Latrobe Prize articulated the purpose and scope of what they call “public interest design.” According to the study’s authors,

[T]he 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.²⁶

This simple explanation suggests that to meet pressing social problems, professionals and educators need to seek new models of practice beyond those explicitly tied to “playing clients.”

One space where such liberated practice can unfold is within design/build education. The last ten years have seen growing interest in programs in which full-scale construction by students is an integral part of design pedagogy. Most famous amongst these programs in the Auburn University Rural Studio, a program that recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Founded by Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee and D. K. Ruth, the Rural Studio has become an important precedent for programs across the country that want to combine full-scale building with aid to underserved communities. Its location in rural Alabama has provided especially fertile ground for experimentation in materials, but its second director, Andrew Freear, has curtailed these experiments considerably in favor of more iterative exploration in housing prototypes.²⁷

As has been demonstrated in this paper, the idea of architecture students building at full-scale is not new. Yet, the moniker design/build has given the practice new life as a committed group of advocates has worked to spread its prevalence.²⁸ From around a dozen active hands-on building

programs in American architectural schools in the early 2000s, there are today at least eighty such efforts operating within the 186 schools listed in the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture directory.²⁹

One prominent leader behind this effort is the Pacific North West-based architect Sergio Palleroni. In his 2004 book *Studio at Large* Palleroni describes student design/build projects unfolding in Mexico, Cuba, India, Africa and Native American reservations in the Western United States. Palleroni argues that design/build is a model of architectural education attuned to the environmental and cultural concerns that have resulted from globalization (including its colonial pre-conditions).³⁰ In particular, he supports this model of practice for its ability to produce different types of identification amongst architectural students. Palleroni writes,

Alongside a discovery of ‘the other’ is a mirrored reflection of ‘the self.’ Removed from their normal cultural context, the students see themselves more clearly against their new backdrop and experiences. Individuals’ ethical action takes on particular relevance for the student in this context and (as Paula Freire and Ivan Illich observed in their writings) becomes the most effective way to fundamentally change the continued inequality of the postcolonial condition.³¹

Just as progressive educators in the early part of the century hoped that youths’ contact with an underprivileged other would produce better citizens, so too do current educators hope to use the spaces of poor communities to produce “citizen architects.”³² Palleroni’s statement argues that otherness can and should play a central role in the formation of architectural ethics. In his writings, Palleroni uses many of the same tropes witnessed in progressive era rhetoric. This includes references to frontier ethics, the value of nonhierarchical exchanges on the job site, the social capital produced by communal labor and references to disadvantaged communities’ “historic capacity to deal with problems of scarcity and lack of resources.”³³ Yet, as architecture students travel to other nations new questions about citizenship and accountability emerge. Given the vastly different governmental contexts of project sites, the consequences of a global approach to architectural ethics deserve further study.

CONCLUSIONS

Three key insights arise from a comparison of those programs of youth building unfolding in the Progressive era and those happening in design/build education today. First, contemporary community design/build and progressive era educators both hoped laboring would help connect

youths to those less privileged than themselves. In turn, this would help produce them as better architects and better citizens. In both moments, design/build pedagogy helped architects temporarily resolve their tenuous relationship to both the elite and working classes. Each generation of architects made use of labor in reference to the specific challenges of their times. In the 1920s, physical labor came to symbolize collective, consensus-based democratic process in a time when American democracy was facing internal and external challenges. In the 1990s and 2000s, when the complexities of the global economy undermined architects' sense of agency, the Auburn University Rural Studio and Palleroni's *Studio at Large* used labor to promote the profession as both an ethical-spiritual actor and a conduit for social and economic development. Educators in each era hoped that physical labor would produce architects who could act independently and with personal and social purpose.

Second, the idea of the American "frontier" has consistently influenced how architects remake their professional self-understandings in times of crisis. In the 1930s, architects and educators referenced craftsmanship and frontier ethics to connect European modernism to American values. In the context of globalization, Rural Studio leaders leveraged a rural aesthetic to define a new genre of American architectural practice, one that allowed both ethical commitment and access to the upper tiers of valuation in the field. Inspired by their rural commitment, a group of Auburn graduates founded the Epicenter in rural Utah. The organization hosts "Frontier Fellows" throughout the year. The artists and designers produce art and artifacts interpreting the environment and culture of Green River, Utah, the Epicenter's home. Architects' persistent interest in the frontier as a terrain for ethical experimentation emerges from the association of normative architectural practice with the urban condition. The rural provides a respite from which architects can formulate critical positions. It also plays off the conflicted relationship architectural modernism has with unruly and uncontrolled spaces. On the frontier, nature and native are both challenges and resources. As such, they have the potential define new paths.

Third, the idea of self-help has helped architects connect with specifically American ideas of (self)government. The idea of self-help navigates between governmental regimes and concepts of individual ethics. Left-leaning scholars argue that self-help offloads governmental responsibilities onto poor individuals. Narratives of self-help, they conclude, hide the fundamentally unequal conditions under which different people are asked to "help themselves." For example, in the Progressive Era, educational leaders proposed self-help as a prerequisite for intellectual freedom. Yet, those involved in experiments like Black Mountain College often failed to acknowledge that their freedom was only preserved by the exclusion of some populations — namely Blacks and Communists. Nor did they fully take account of their own privilege relative to their surrounding towns or regions.

Yet, updated from its eighteenth-century puritanical roots by American philosophers like John Dewey, the idea of self-help does not necessarily rely on simple notions of individualism.³⁴ Instead, it defines a paradoxical condition in which individuals pursue their own democratic potential while confronting the fact that others may not enjoy the same privilege. The concept of self-help has at times provided disenfranchised groups a

channel by which to exert political and territorial claims.³⁵ It thus represents a malleable terrain that may serve multiple purposes depending on the contexts and socio-economic locations of those who choose to employ it. In either case, self-help is usually an explicit argument against "state help" or other forms of direct relief, and is thus a core principle of the American welfare state as it has evolved over the course of the twentieth century.

The 1990s saw a revival of faith in volunteerism and self-help as governmental strategies. This included the strong and still prevalent influence of programs such as Habitat for Humanity. In this context, the Rural Studio's version of empathetic philanthropy struck a cord. Yet, tensions remained around whom the program helps most: poor residents or architectural students.

To conclude, it is important to note that in both eras architects took a proactive role in defining the boundaries of the field. They invented new ways of working, project types and clients in times of severe economic contraction. References to the frontier helped architects imagine these new territories while the performance of labor and self-help created an association between architecture and the value of hard work. These strategies provided temporary solutions in times of exceptional vulnerability while avoiding direct critiques of existing political systems.

ENDNOTES

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