

# If:Then, Assessing the Impacts of 20 Years of a University-Based Community Design Center

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**Keywords:** community engaged design, pedagogy, evaluation

University-based community design centers have been a part of architectural education since the 1960s yet their existence is volatile over time as federal funding cycles and social movements for equity and justice rise and dissipate. Within this fluid context a longitudinal study of Public Interest Design pedagogy and community impacts of the work is difficult. Public interest design serves different clients and works toward outcomes beyond formal or material innovations, and yet success is still measured through images of physical forms and statements of concept. This research asks the question: What can new project evaluation frameworks that consider the many impacts and outcomes of collaborative design processes teach us?

Based on grounded research theory, we used qualitative in-person and online interviews and site visits for 50 projects across the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design's history and all six categories of its work to gain an understanding of impacts. The study reveals a different view of success and failure for projects aimed at supporting partner organizations' missions. The results highlight the strengths and limitations of academic community engaged design practice in addressing historical inequities in design and architecture, the challenges of bridging campus-community dynamics, and in changing public understanding of design more broadly.

Commitment to engaged evaluation is co-equal to that of engaged design processes. The Center's impact on individual partners and the city and region can only be understood through ongoing evaluation. Strengths including the ability to serve as a connector and facilitator, and challenges such as long-term commitment to partners due to variable funding for staff capacity require embedded systems for regular evaluation beyond design quality. This research synthesizes both tangible and intangible additional qualities and/or services associated with the collaborative design process that are more determinative of a project's success or sustainability.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY ENGAGED DESIGN

The first wave of community design centers were launched in the 1960s at a time of social upheaval in civil rights efforts, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the rise of women's liberation, and as a way to counter a crisis in professional competence. Many of these first generation community design centers in schools of Planning and Architecture closed in the '70s and '80s due to changes in federal funding and grants. The second wave of community design centers and programs started in the 1990s and since the year 2000 the ACSA reported a steep increase in the number of community design centers in North America, from just under 70 to "over 200 active organizations, covering ever-expanding geographic, disciplinary, and strategic territories."

Many of today's community design centers and practices that work at the intersection of design and social justice trace their ideological roots to the community design work of the '60s and '70s which was described by Mary C. Comerio in a 1984 article:

"Community design is based on a recognition that professional technical knowledge is often inadequate in the resolution of societal problems, and it represents the addition of a moral and political content to professional practice. In particular, it grew from the belief that all citizens had a right to be represented in decisions about the environment, and that planning would benefit from the maximum public input."

What is the impact of this work? Does the traditional post-occupancy survey used in architecture do justice to these expanded aims of public interest design practitioners? The closest metric for comparing and understanding design/build projects is the SEED assessment from Public Interest Design. SEED looks at individual projects through Social, Economic, and Environmental lenses to understand the aims and impacts of the Design. While this method of assessment is a much needed tool, it largely relies on design-team-generated narratives reviewed by evaluators to assess the goals and impacts of each project. This research team worked to create a longitudinal study that offers replicable ways to assess impacts across a body of work.



Figure 1. Post Occupancy Evaluation Design/Build Project. Image credit: Small Center

## COMMUNITY ENGAGED DESIGN AT SMALL CENTER

Founded in 2005 in New Orleans the Small Center is committed to building capacity and coalitions to address inequity in the built environment and focuses on expanding access to high quality design services to those who have been underserved by design professions. Developed in partnership with community based organizations, the Center's projects fall into six categories: design/build, architectural visioning, urban design, graphic design advocacy, public programming/exhibitions and other projects. Budgets for projects range from ~\$20,000 for semester-long design/builds to ~\$3,000-5,000 for co-curricular visioning/urban design projects and exhibitions. The timeline of these projects range from semester long design-build studios and public programming/exhibitions to 2 week to 3 month visioning projects.

The Center's work is also embedded in the School of Architecture's curricular and co-curricular programming, with most projects engaging both undergraduate and graduate students. An off-campus location and storefront space serves as a nexus for public programming focused on issues of the built environment, bringing together artists, makers, students and non-profit organizations while ensuring women, young people, and black and brown leaders direct these conversations. At the core of all research, teaching and practice is deep community engagement and a collaborative design process. The Center is recognized as a leader in the field of public interest design and has received a range of awards: traditional design (AIA), socially engaged post-occupancy evaluations (SEED, Rudy Bruner) and engaged design and research efforts (ACSA).

## SURVEY BASICS

Conducted between 2019-2021 by an outside evaluator, the research design was based on grounded research theory, a method of research that uses iterative comparative analysis to generate results that are abstracted directly from the data

gathered. The initial topic guide was informed by previous evaluation efforts conducted internally by past Center staff and in conjunction with the current center Director. Ten pilot interviews were conducted with project partners to test the initial topic guide questions. This in conjunction with staff feedback led to a reduction of the number of interview themes. In particular, the question "What changed after [the completion of the collaborative design process]?" was refined several times throughout the process and left much more open-ended. Other themes included: organizational capacity, ideas of design and architecture, address and redress of historical inequities, process success and failures and post-occupancy function for design/build projects.

Qualitative in-person and on-line interviews, site visits and observations were conducted for 50 projects representing 15 years of Small Center history from 2006-2020. Selected projects reflected the six categories of work: visioning, design/build, planning, graphics, exhibits, and other; the size and scale of the Center's work; and a range of perceived successes/failures, known as such to both staff and the outside evaluator due to the intimate network of communities in a mid-sized city. Interviews were conducted with staff, faculty, and community partners and conducted in-person pre-pandemic, then ZOOM with high response rate, as other researchers have found. In three instances, several people from the same organization were interviewed in order to gain different perspectives on the same project. The fluid nature of the non-profit sector in New Orleans led to interviewees representing a range of roles: from the leaders who oversaw the engaged design process to new people who never interacted with the Center; and a few who knew almost nothing about the Center's involvement. Interviewees were ensured anonymity and mirrored the diversity of project partners across race, gender, age, sexuality, and position within their organization's hierarchy.



Figure 2. Engaged Design Process-Mock Ups. Image credit: Jose Cotto

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The data were as varied as the projects and yet some key themes emerged in the comparative analysis. These takeaways point to aspects of the design and engagement process that go beyond a final building or outcome; they underscore the ability of public interest design processes to build understanding of design, capacity within partner organizations, and networks between communities working to address local challenges.

### 1) Relationships matter

Highlighted in interviews that represented a cross-section of interviewee socio-demographics, project type, and organizational size was a focus on continuity and commitment of faculty and staff connected to the Center and opportunities to connect to new networks, resources and stakeholders as key aspects of the process.

Current core staff has been engaged in collaborative design work at the Center since its inception nearly 20 years ago and/or in adjacent local engaged design work. This provides continuity and builds trust through consistent accessibility over time, with the commitment to long-term outcomes noted by interviewees.

“What changed is I got another believer in this project. He believed in it. Put his name on it. Dedicated additional pro bono resources from his firm”. They continue to work

together and have a personal and professional relationship to this day.” (Anonymous, Visioning)

“I know I can pick up the phone or send an email to Nick anytime, and he’s gonna answer me even if it’s just a question I have about the space they built for us, or, you know, who’s the next project? What are they doing next? I feel the whole team, the whole team was that way.” (Anonymous, Design/Build)

“Gave me hope that there are opportunities that citizens can work with others. Time from professionals to support our vision and my personal life. TCC efforts galvanized our community, from a mustard seed to a force.” (Anonymous, Visioning)

### 2) Design process and outcomes provide opportunity to gain legitimacy

For some partner organizations the design project was a physical manifestation of their goals or a process that they could pull constituents, supporters, and funders into as an act of visioning a better future. Many pointed to ways in which the process itself and the name of the university involved helped others take their work seriously.

“The design/build project the Center created gained recognition as the first of its kind in the city; got a lot of enthusiastic response across the city. We got more opportunities after that as an organization” (Anonymous, Design/Build)

“We were able to enter meetings in City Hall with confidence, and an aura of respectability and ability. Helped us raise our sights.” (Anonymous, Design/Build)

“The process of applying, getting selected, it being out there — our new name!—it helped solidify that there was a new organization, that we exist. It was the first thing we had won! Seeing the name up on the board at the Center at this big event with hundreds of people. Made us real. Made the organization exist on paper. We hadn’t done any of our own projects yet, but now we existed.” (Anonymous, Graphic Design Advocacy)

### 3) Organizational capacity building takes many forms

Collaborative design projects can act to bolster small or nascent organizations (e.g. new grantwriters seeking organizational support). Further, connecting organizations doing similar work across the city and creating visibility to funders can yield unexpected results and new partnerships, even across a significant time delta between design project and funding and/or implementation.





Figure 3. Partner Feedback & Review. Image credit: Jose Cotto

“We share the resources and designs from SC to bring in new partners.” Other partnerships who will be brought in to build the 2nd building which SC didn’t have time/resources to do. (Anonymous, Design/Build,Visioning)<sup>1</sup>

“They made a great book — I use it a lot at our community meetings.” The partner took images of the design/build to go apply for grants: first from EPA, then National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, GNOF, next planning for Kresge application; gave them something to take to their funders/grantors. (Anonymous, Design/Build)

“You know Small Center has continued to connect us to resources, to people, to experts, and it’s been a long-lasting help.” (Anonymous, Design/Build, Visioning)

“We were able to catch Fidelity Bank as a sponsor, which was great. We actually hit them up a couple months ago, right as COVID started happening, and they gave us a grant for something else. That relationship definitely opened at Small Center.” (Anonymous, Exhibition)

#### 4) Ideas and understanding of design changed

In working on issues of equity in the built environment and expanding access to high quality design services to those who have been traditionally underserved by design professions - many of the project partners and constituents are working with an architect for the first time. Ideas about who architects are and what they do are inevitably challenged in the process of working on a project. Additionally, the center practices a pedagogy and process of breaking down typical power structures and creating a space for collaborative processes where the expertise each person brings to the table is honored. Interviewees reported a shift in understanding of what design is and an expanded idea of what is possible.

“Highlighted for us the importance of visuals in the media that we do. Seeing the coverage we received because of the spectacle we created. It reinforced the importance of design/media for our staff.” (Anonymous, Multiple Projects)

“I feel more confident in making decisions. The confidence of knowing the design language. Of knowing what I bring to the table — I know what the space needs to do for the





Figure 4. Exhibition and Public Programming Opening. Image credit: Jose Cotto



organization, what it needs to feel and function like. I don't know what materials to use, about the technology, but I know those other aspects. And then you [architect] show me what that could look like." (Anonymous, Visioning)

"Our clients would question why they were going to work with Center designers: assumption that 'there won't be care and telling us 'we have actively NOT sought out designers, architects, historic preservation because of the racist history of design'. But by the end (of working with Center), we changed that! So many clients were saying 'I too am now a historic preservationist'. That's huge!" (Anonymous, Visioning, Urban Design)

"The design of something: a structure/an entity in a community — to me, it is more than just a nice building. It's multipurpose in perceptions in how people envision it. And how does that help to make a change? So this did help us to look at ourselves as being a change agent. This is one of the strategic ah-ha moments we had to have: 'Who are we? Who are we now? How do we fit into the existing environment?'" (Anonymous, Vision, Design/Build)

## 5) Addressing historical inequities at multiple scales

Partner organizations identified themselves as addressing historical inequity. For some the collaborative design process facilitated additional learning about structural inequities, while others already engaged in the work of disassembling such systems sought partnership in making their research more visible to both their constituencies and the broader public, often through graphic advocacy, exhibitions, and public programming.

Projects including historic geographic research revealed layered inequities in which flooding, heat island effect, pollution, and a dearth of public services overlap neatly with historic segregation and redlining. Interviewees recognized the Center's commitment to both telling these stories and committing to taking a role in reckoning with the history of racism in design professions and highlighted current limitations of these efforts.

"I would not think of building something ever again without the community. It should just be a normal, standard I think. I'm this white, military guy, coming into an African American neighborhood. Process matters-- building trust, communicating. We're going to have to evoke reconciliation." (Anonymous, Visioning)

Students "need to reflect the diversity that you want to see in this design field. If you want a design field that is doing these projects the team would have to also be diverse in order for that vision to really kinda take hold." (Anonymous, Design-Build)

"At university conversations, opening now, and my only hope, wish and prayers, they'll continue to open. And you know,

there's reckonings that are happening across the board, right. But three years ago, four years ago, when the Center was trying to lead these conversations, and me being an observer and a participant in those various roles, seeing how difficult it was for staff. And that was a missed opportunity. (Anonymous, Multiple Projects)

## ADDITIONAL TAKEAWAYS

In addition to the findings above, interviews highlighted further themes worth mentioning. The first was the need for the Center to re-consider project scale to respond to current challenges. "An important thing for them to do going forward is for them to develop a wider lens for the Center to look at how the city will survive (the pandemic, economics, ocean rise/environmental issues). The Center needs to think much bigger. How will we develop plans and projects that will knit a plan for what we're up against?" (Anonymous, Multiple Projects)

The need to more clearly define expectations was also highlighted by interviewees involved in design/build projects and networking across organizations also deemed an opportunity.

"When you said 150 projects, 15th anniversary, I was like WOW! I had no idea! What other projects have been funded and what do their final projects look like? There's a network we didn't even know we are a part of." (Anonymous, Visioning)

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

As public interest design and architecture education evolves to engage more critically with questions of inequity and of design access there is an even greater importance in broadening the evaluative tools and methods used to assess the impacts of this work. This research was an initial attempt to create a new framework as the study employed a grounded research theory approach and a third party assessor which expanded the understanding of our work's impact beyond that of normative project assessment in the field conducted by a staff member.

Moving forward, the authors recognize the value of deeper analysis of the existing transcripts, in particular exploring a focus on process as a challenge to monoculturalism in the fields of architecture, design, and University research/community engagement as well as the theme of failure more broadly. To improve the Center's work, the authors also see the importance of instituting standard evaluation practice for the Center's work moving forward. This practice would integrate process evaluation with current post-occupancy assessment for partner organizations providing an opportunity to strengthen relationships. The Center would begin sending evaluations to all students involved in our work (co-curricular and curricular) on an annual basis. Key informant interviews and a quantitative survey of Center alumni would also

provide deeper insight into the impacts of Center involvement on current professional practice and civic engagement.

Study results indicate collaborative design processes have impacts that go beyond the completion of the design project for partner organizations. The results also highlight limitations of this work to address structural inequity at societal scale and the challenges of working within the structures of larger institutions. Our hope is that the evaluation methodology is transferable to others and the results increase the recognition that university based community design centers and critical community-engaged design pedagogy are essential in addressing inequity in design and deserve investment.



Figure 5. Student collaboration with partner. Image credit: Jose Cotto

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