New Approaches to Community Design

Moderator:
THOMAS BARRIE
Lawrence Technological University

Panelists:
FATHER TERRANCE CURRY
Director, University of Detroit Mercy Collaborative Design Center

SHANNON CRISS
Director, Mississippi State University Small Town Center

JOHN M. CARY, JR.
National Vice President, American Institute of Architecture Students

"PERHAPS NEVER IN HISTORY HAVE THE TALENTS, SKILLS, THE BROAD VISION AND THE IDEALS OF THE ARCHITECTURE PROFESSION BEEN MORE URGENTLY NEEDED. THE PROFESSION COULD BE POWERFULLY BENEFICIAL AT A TIME WHEN THE LIVES OF FAMILIES AND ENTIRE COMMUNITIES HAVE GROWN INCREASINGLY FRAGMENTED, WHEN CITIES ARE IN AN ERA OF DECLINE AND DECAY INSTEAD OF LIMITLESS GROWTH, AND WHEN THE VALUE OF BEAUTY IN DAILY LIFE IS OFTEN BELITTLED."

–Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice *by Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang*

University-based community design programs are an effective means for architectural education to bridge the gap between the academy and the public. They offer students an enriched educational experience while serving the public in areas of architecture, urban design, community development, and planning. As stated in the Boyer and Mitgang report, their goals include the education of "students for both competence and caring — in service to the nation." At their best, they are potent vehicles through which the context and audience of architectural education can be broadened and reconsidered.

Though community design has a long history in architectural education, recently there has been a renewed commitment to the public realm and to proactive social responsibility. Many new approaches to community design, programs, and initiatives have been created in recent years at schools of architecture in North America. It was in this context that the ACSA Board of Directors founded the Architects in Society Committee in 1997 and conducted a national survey of community design programs at schools of architecture in North America. *The ACSA Sourcebook of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America*, published by the ACSA, was the result of the survey and the ongoing work of the committee. It includes an astonishing array of programs and approaches that all share the overall goal of serving students and society.

Most community design centers emphasize the educational benefits of service learning. The Centre for Environmental Design Research and Outreach at Carleton University considers "information dissemination as an essential role," and The Design Center for American Urban Landscape at the University of Minnesota states that its mission is "to educate public and private decision makers, professionals, and citizens about the value of design... and expand the definition and field of urban design study." In this context, centers such as the Small Town Center at Mississippi State University intend to "influence public policy," and the Urban Community Improvement Program at the University of Nebraska encourages "more people to become active in the betterment of their neighborhoods." The outreach emphasis of the Urban Design Workshop at Yale University provides "the setting for lecture series, seminars, colloquia, and publications."

Some design centers emphasize research, such as the Architectural Research Center at Texas Tech which "promotes interdisciplinary research activity." At the Special Interest Group in Urban Settlements (SIGUS) program at MIT, there is a particular emphasis on housing. Accessibility is the focus at The Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University of Buffalo, as it is at the Center for Universal Design at N.C. State University. Historic Preservation is one of the services that the City College of N.Y. Architectural Center pro-

vides for Harlem, and The Urban Technical Assistance Project at Columbia University "envisions advanced technologies as playing an ever-increasing role in the generation of new knowledge concerning the urban environment."

Most programs consider working in the community to be an essential component. The Community-based Projects Program at Ball State University asserts that "a realistic understanding of urban problems can be best gained through a 'hands-on' approach," and their Mobile Assistance Studio — a 34' Coachman bus outfitted as an office — travels to small towns and cities to conduct workshops similar to the R/UDAT process. The Community Design Center at the University of Arkansas offers a summer program where students live and work in a small town for eight weeks. Lawrence Technological University's Detroit Studio is located in a storefront space in central Detroit and works primarily in Detroit's neighborhoods.

Many centers serve to bridge the gap between the academy and the profession. The Tejido program at the University of Arizona pairs professionals with students in their service projects. At the Student's Design Clinic at Carleton University, architectural services are provided by students for a fee, and at Yale University there are paid internships available for students. The SIGUS program at MIT offers a "Visiting Practitioner's Program" which is a "2 - 3 month self-motivated program" at the university.

Some programs are extensive and well-established, such as the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, founded in 1963, which has a staff of thirty-three and produces over eighty projects a year, or the Asian Neighborhood Design Center in Berkeley, CA, where most of the services are provided by staff. Some are more modest. All share a commitment to education and service, and of providing a two-way connection between the university and community.

This session will provide a perspectives on contemporary community design programs with a particular focus on the diversity of approaches. Issues such as educational standards, organizational models, project selection criteria, project methodology, student pay and credit concerns, liability issues, scheduling, and deliverables will be addressed — with a particular focus on the overall educational and service goals of community design. It is an opportunity for educators involved in community design to share experiences and network, and for those considering establishing a community design program to be introduced to a variety of choices. It is hoped that this special focus session and the *ACSA Sourcebook of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America*, will be a useful resource, further intercommunication between schools, and enrich our collective efforts.

University Based Community Design

THOMAS BARRIE

University-based community design programs are an effective means for architectural education to bridge the gap between the academy and the public. They offer students an enriched educational experience while serving the public in areas of architecture, urban design, community development, and planning. At its best, it is a potent vehicle to broaden the context and audience of architectural education.

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Working with Chance: Community Outreach in the Small Town

SHANNON CRISS

As I spend more and more time working within communities and with students, I find life and, my life as an architect, a lot more interesting engaging contingent, unknown possibilities. In a world where we increasingly want to control the ways in which we produce products, come to expect consistency and are frankly scared of things that are unfamiliar; I am excited by the opportunities that **chance** has to offer. I think that the decisions that we make are more **vital** when others are involved and those characters and particular characteristics of a place emerge to challenge us.

Jonestown[1], a Mississippi Delta town of 1500, may offer one of the most challenging of the state with 68% below the poverty line and an average household income of $7,313. With the Welfare Reform Act taking effect in our communities, there are critical needs that need to be addressed in order for the unemployed to become employable. With Mississippi State University groups, the Stennis Institute of Government, the sociology department and a local community college, we have initiated the work at a most basic level, helping the Jonestown community identify specific needs such as 24-hour day care (for factory workers), after-school care (giving attention to youth to avoid current, un-

wanted pregnancies and gang activities), GED and job placement programs and a set of city government and social welfare programs. Our role has been one to initiate focus, develop preliminary design work, a full feasibility study, and now, involve state legislators and agencies to secure bond bills and grants. I am proud of the student achievement and level of rigor in this work. I believe that tangible contributions such as this demonstrate commitment and investment, helping communities gain buy-in from those that can secure funding and ultimately implementation.

There are tremendous needs in this little community and a wealthy resource such as this 20,000 square-foot abandoned school building could be made useful. The means for a community to get from an abstract **need** to a physical **resolve** (at least to alleviate the obvious needs) I find is not one our profession typically takes on as we don't choose to get involved in the messiness of politics and social concerns of others. It requires us to immerse ourselves into the community and initiate work, being pro-active at a local level outside of architecture.

When faced with real people in the community I, and my students, are forced to struggle with the question, what is the value of architecture? As I look around the MS landscape and around the country I wonder. It seems possible, and I believe mostly the case, for architects to think and live within their own world. All too often, architecture is a state of mind with its own jargon. I think that we are failing as a profession to take a pro-active role in society and to find ways to assist communities such as Jonestown.[2]

> Not only should we find architecture relevant in rural communities of poverty but also we must seek a role in the making of our middle landscapes.

The built artifacts of our landscapes reveal the shared values our society holds, in the way that they are made and maintained. At one time, our buildings were wonderfully particular responding to local situations and characteristics. Now, with advanced technologies and export systems our culture is more and more focused upon solely finding the most economic means of production in delivering the built environment. Saving the buck is what dominates. As a society we have given up the local, specific characteristics of a people and substituted in its place more "economic" solutions based upon a global market.

We shop and live in buildings that are mostly manufactured, packaged and delivered, supporting outsider's wallets, giving up local investment.[3] Michael Benedikt in his recent article, "Less for Less Yet" says, "Our environment has become ever more commodified , ever more the subject of short-term investment, income generations and re-sale, rather than of lifelong dwelling or long-term community making." [4]

> We architects tend to look away and would *prefer* to DESIGN for the upper 5%. But, who will tend to the 95%?

When you consider that our small rural communities do not have the money to support planners and ultimately good design practices, and more often than not, do not even see the value in it; there is a huge gap. The gap exists between architects/designers not wishing to grapple with the 95% and a society who doesn't see the value of a designed environment...or perhaps simply doesn't know better.

Of course, most urban renewal from the 1960's and 70's weakened our standing, as that is what *many believe that is* what architects, designers, and planners do. We see the remains of razed buildings replaced with asphalt and modern-inspired knock-offs. Planning in most small communities, if it takes place at all, concerns itself with "comprehensive" plans that identify land-use, infrastructure and how to get a Walmart Super-Center into the community. In my experience, community leadership has a limited view of economic development with very little concern of an improved quality of life in the built environment. Rarely do I find community leaders that have vision about the potential of natural landscape features, finding new life for abandoned buildings and capitalizing upon the particularities of place as the guide to good decision-making about new development.

> Placelessness and neglect are eroding our rural communities; and it is not just in MS.

An example of a way we have resisted this trend is undertaking the task of researching, developing and implementing design guidelines for a 600-home neighborhood in Tupelo, MS.[5] We worked with the city and an enlightened non-profit organization who wished to renew the neighborhood, maintaining the intangible and durable characteristics of the homes and the landscape while also, maintaining this as an economically viable place for lower and middle-income families.

We worked with local residents, learned from Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City* and saw Seaside, Florida first-hand, understanding the role of design guidelines there. This project allowed us focus upon a real-world situation and ultimately was adopted by the city as the official guideline for renewal and development in this community.

> Beyond issues related to rural poverty and a placeless middle landscape we are finding direction from local people in unexpected ways.

If one slows down and looks, one can find innovative responses to challenging situations. Very small elements offer the possibility of a different approach to making or re-making one's environment. For me, these demonstrate an act of will and an ex-

pression of a fundamental creative act that is instructive.[6]

These small acts raise a compelling premise for our work: *small acts can have a large impact and that modest acts can perhaps be more meaningful than heroic ones.*

This guy bought a trailer house on the right for $500 to add-on to the pick-up trailer shell that he already had; his friend gave him materials for the building shed in the middle. It's a make-do operation.

People that struggle with limited resources generally can not and do not make what we might consider "architecture," they must rely upon more modest means to express themselves in their surroundings. Things are collected with the sense that they may someday come in handy; things are contingent as there is not a definite plan; everything has potential. To make something valuable out of what another would consider value-less holds our imagination. This very act of making and re-making something in this way, directs our attention to the maker and the act itself. Learning to improvise and respond to the conditions and materials at-hand provides an important lesson to us as architects. By slowing down and seeing the **potential of a place** and **its people,** we re-make ourselves to fit the circumstances at hand; we approach our work in a different manner. This has been enormously instructive to us in the Center and School of Architecture.

Centers such as ours need to be pushing the envelope and creating new models for improvement of our communities' public space, while also providing and building instructive models for architecture and education. Perhaps the best we can do in our Centers is bring students face to face with the rural landscape and hope that someday these students expand our role as architects, offering more to society and ultimately, create new models for architectural practice. Getting out into the larger settings of communities with hands-on , real-world issues is critical and we strive to meet two basic goals in the Center: first, to promote the social development of the architect and second, to spark an awareness of the possibilities of architecture within our community leadership.

In the Small Town Center, we work throughout the state initially through design studio and elective course work. We try to avoid quick solutions and I have learned how important it is to deliver tangible results. These courses are challenged to design with the needs of others in communities, but must be reshaped to meet the objectives of the coursework. In this way, the communities' needs are not artificially constructed for the studio but are current and actual.

A basic conflict emerges as we work within both camps, of academic objectives and community concerns:

> Is it possible to satisfy the pedagogical objectives of a design studio and at the same time meet the particular needs of a community group?[7]

There is a contradiction between the private desire for self-creation on the one hand and a type of public responsibility to a community on the other. I think we can all feel that we went into the study of architecture for our shared desire to make and be "*creative*." Often in school, student work is typically evaluated with a bias toward individual originality. However, once in practice, we quickly realize that the practical needs of a building owner or community require *restraint and accommodation.*

> These two ideals, one private the other public, are inherently different and often are in direct conflict.

In the studio and in the work of the Center, it is necessary for us to be both responsive to community needs and to provide space for student experimentation—that is where true ingenuity takes place. If the conditions for making decisions are artificial and fictional our resulting work will generally be conceptual. We must find that degree of outside reality that will allow our work to be more relevant to broader, more public concerns.

Our authority over our work is challenged. Working with others exposes our personal thoughts and challenges us to make artifacts that can be inhabited by others. Again to quote Michael Benedikt, "t(T)he very act of making, working to both gain an appreciation of the technical and poetic qualities of the things made, helps us to make a powerful case that architecture matters. "[8]

I will conclude with a recent project completed in Okolona, a small town with complex and divided interests. [9] The work here is not merely the product that holds value, but value is held within the site including the construction skills of the students and community volunteers, debates among students, between students and faculty and the value of the ways in which drawings communicate and mis-communicate ideas to others.

The work's authority is no longer that of the individual but relies upon broader concerns, which are internal to the problem; such as the flexibility of form to allow for a diversity of uses, the durability of materials and assembly to endure the elements and use, the budget of $24,000 for materials for a 6500 square foot site, and the ability to share an idea among thirty-two students and a community.

Richard Sennett, in his book, *The Uses of Disorder*, says that "a certain kind of self-sufficient aloneness and singleness is born, paradoxically, at the moment when a man sees he is **not** going to be able to be the master of all that occurs in his life."[10]

Such uncertainty allows the contradictory aims of self-creation and public responsibility to coexist.

A new confidence emerges from the context of uncertainties as a person relies upon her own beliefs and values, reconfirm-

ing them in the act of building.

I believe such is the critical value of working in public ways.

This park was conceived as being able to both shape and hold imaginative qualities. By working through it, in a collaborative fashion, we realized that a looser fit between original intent and final product was truer and more sincere to the needs of the site and the community.

Through our work in the Center, we have also come to understand how critical it is to involve the community in the future life of the projects; that it is not possible for an artifact to be cared for and maintained without a community, or a client, taking possession of it. I think that this principle can be instructive to architectural practice in general. In doing this kind of work, I am realizing more and more the potential role and contributions we can make as architects. It is important that we as educators, in such outreach programs, foster situations whereby those that live and work in communities truly empower their own talents and ultimately possess the artifacts we are involved with.

I think Harvey Gantt, a noted politician and architect from the Carolinas, put it best when he says, "Our profession must get involved in the issues that really shape the directions by which communities move towards dealing with race, education, crime and poverty. Showing up only when a building needs to be designed is too late. I believe that if we get involved earlier in the process we can actually help to shape what is to be built and how to build buildings.

The bottom line is that if we're going to be more than mere ornaments, more than cake decorators, if we're going to go beyond being just an after-thought in the decision-making process, we have to take some risks. I think the risks are worth it. We will gain the reward of an enhanced standing in the community. Especially if our activism and our leadership and our knowledge make the quality of life better for the community." [11]

I believe that we must put ourselves in the middle of more unknown territories and to find ways of engaging more volatile and unknown quantities, at least that is the trajectory course we're on at the present.

ENDNOTES

1 I began this project in August, 1998 with the MSU Stennis Institute of Government a class of sixteen fourth-year students as a studio project. Since then, we have received grants from the Stennis Institute of Government, Coahoma Community College and the Hardin Foundation to develop a feasibility report for the renovation of the building. Currently we are working with the district's Congressman, state legislation and various granting agencies to secure funding for the renovation.

2 I am truly fond of extraordinary form, careful detailing and innovative thinking in architecture as it contributes to architecture's value to society. However, I think far too often these aspects of architecture are over-valued in our academic institutions and within our professional organizations at the cost of other necessary contributions we could be making; this is fertile ground for the majority of our culture.

3 Wendell Berry discusses the "indispensable ideal and goal" that the only sustainable city is a city in balance with its countryside. "Now, counting the post office, the town has five enterprises, one of which does not serve the local community. There is now no market for farm produce in the town or within forty miles. We no longer have a garage or repair shop of any kind. We have had no doctor for forty years and no school for thirty. Now, as a local economy and therefore as a community, Port Royal is dying." Wendell Berry in an essay, " Conservation and Local Economy" in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992) provides an excellent argument for local investment versus an investment at a global level.

4 I refer to Michael Benedikt's article, "Less For Less Yet: On Architecture's Value(s) in the Martketplace" in *Designer/Builder* journal (Santa Fe, New Mexico: October 1999).

5 This project was developed through a grant provided by the Appalachian Regional Commission and an association with a non-profit organization, Community Enterprises and the City of Tupelo Planning Department. John Poros led an elective course involving a dozen architectural students and Shannon Criss in developing the design guidelines. The course laid the basis for the project, completing the set of guidelines by August of 1998.

6 These thoughts are inspired by a paper given by David Perkes entitled, "Down-home Double-wide: Exceeding Function and the Function of Excess in Mobile Home Modifications."

7 Ideas here were developed in partnership with David Perkes from Mississippi State University's School of Architecture in a paper entitled, "Working Space: Notes on Design Studio Work in the Public Realm." This paper was presented at the National Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in Cleveland, Ohio in Spring 1998.

8 M. Benedikt's article, "Less For Less Yet: On Architecture's Value(s) in the Marketplace."

9 This project was developed by the Small Town's involvement in securing funding through grants and contributions in the summer of 1998. Then, in the spring of 1999, Nils Gore, Shannon Criss , thirty-two third-year students and community representatives worked together to design and build the elements within the park. The work was completed in May of 1999.

10 Richard Sennett argues that the "accepted ideal of order generates patterns of behavior among the urban middle class that are stultifying, narrow and violence-prone. And he proposes a functioning city that can incorporate anarchy, diversity, and creative disorder to bring into being adults who can openly respond to and deal with the challenges of life." See Richard Sennett's *The Uses of Disorder* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970)

11 Harvey Gantt spoke at an AIA Educators and Practitioners Net Professional Interest Area National Steering Committee at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina in October, 1997.

Adding Perspective to a Position

JOHN M. CARY, JR.

As fall quarter of my first year at the University of Minnesota drew to a close, I came to the realization that the routine of going to class, studying, and sleeping yielded little time to maintain and further develop an authentic commitment to a life of service and leadership. These were the two premiere elements of citizenship that I had been introduced to during the four years of my Jesuit, college-preparatory, high school education.

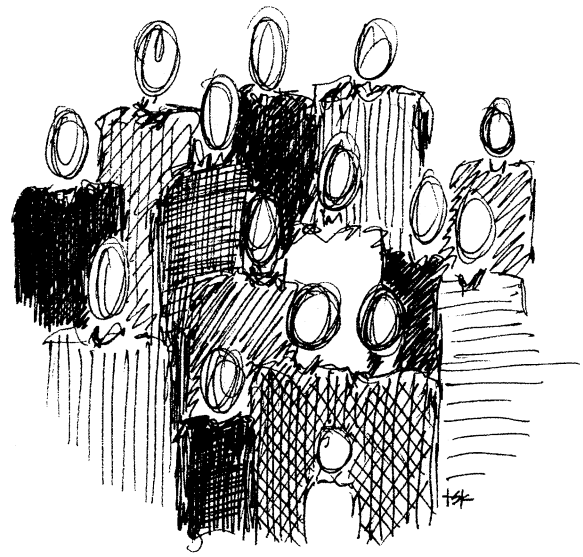
During summer 1997, I enrolled in an intensive study, community service-learning class through the University's Office for Special Learning Opportunities (OSLO). As a member of the summer class and a teaching assistant for the following academic year, I gained knowledge, insight, and training while serving in and working with various Minneapolis community agencies such as the Project for Pride in Living Summer Youth Program. Through applied research, journal reflections, and interpersonal communication with peers and members of the community, I quickly became convinced that students could successfully establish strong links between their course work and community service experiences. Likewise, within the realms of architectural education, I firmly believe that community service-learning has even greater potential to reveal innumerable connections between our traditional studies in architectural design, history, and theory.

By my final year, increased involvement within my major of architecture, and specifically studio, had sadly suspended my connection to community service-learning and social experiences outside studio. At long last, and continuing through the present, my undergraduate honors thesis and eventual work as a member of the ACSA Architects in Society Committee offered the opportunity to breathe new life into my seemingly fragmented studies. (The thesis was composed with the support of Dean Thomas Fisher and reviewed by numerous University of Minnesota faculty members from the disciplines of applied anthropology, architecture, landscape architecture, and urban studies who are key to the creation, development, and maintenance of courses that integrate community service-learning and design-build opportunities.)

What would authentic service-learning based within the community, as well as increased application of the approaches to community involvement profiled in the *ACSA Sourcebook of Community Design Programs* (described below), bring to architectural education and our respective communities? More importantly, what do, what should, and what could our architecture programs offer to communities? What kind of expertise do we, as faculty members and students, have to offer? My ongoing research attempts to address these and related questions. The increasing discussion and community work generated from this research will continue to be our tool and vehicle for fostering stronger relationships between our architectural programs and societal issues.

The ACSA Sourcebook of Community Design Programs at Schools of Architecture in North America is one of many resources intended to do just that. The sourcebook is the result of an ongoing survey, begun in 1997 by the ACSA Architects in Society Initiative, of all ACSA member schools. Only 33 schools responded to the 1997 survey, more than a dozen of which indicated no community involvement programs at their schools. The information included is only as complete and accurate as the information provided to ACSA through the survey and program Web sites. In addition, the exclusion of any school or organization from the sourcebook does not necessarily imply that it does not offer special programs of this type. The sourcebook catalogs all community design programs and centers across North America brought to the attention of the ACSA. Even in its draft form, it is the most comprehensive and up-to-date guide to community design compiled to date, profiling an array of programs and approaches that all share the overall goal of serving students and society. More specifically, the sourcebook, released for feedback at the 2000 ACSA Annual Meeting, includes:

- profiles on 46 university-affiliated programs (ordered by state);
- a history of community design centers by Rex Curry, director of the Association for Community Design (ACD);
- an introduction to the ACD;
- profiles on 25 independent community design centers (ordered by state);



- a copy of the ACSA Community Involvement Programs Survey;
- collateral positions on community service;
- information on securing IDP credit for community and professional service;
- a list of all collateral grants supporting community service;
- a list of all collateral awards recognizing community service;
- acknowledgements and thoughtful quotes on community service; and
- an indexed listing (ordered by state) of community design/build programs, university-affiliated design centers, university-based research centers, and independent design centers.

A revised edition of the sourcebook is expected for release and availability to all ACSA member schools, independent design centers, and AIA components by mid-summer 2000. Following that release, the sourcebook will exist as a searchable database on the ACSA Web site.

By and large, the potentials for collaboration with and service to our respective communities remain immeasurable. As faculty and students, we must take arms against the frequently isolated curricula, lack of administrative structures recognizing faculty and student community involvement, and current perceived relationship between course work and community involvement haunting many of our programs and minimizing the role of service in architectural education.