It Takes the Children to "Masterplan" the Neighborhood

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Introduction

This paper describes an approach taken for a design studio project that was grounded on the project site's unique conditions and the project outcome. In particular, the paper demonstrates a child-focused feedback approach to a school-based community outreach program focusing on revitalization and the primary outcome of such an approach: *urban agriculture-based community development.*

This collaborative community revitalization project involves the Detroit Studio community outreach program of Lawrence Technological University architecture school and various other participants. The project was directed by the author, who also directs this community outreach program. The locations of the project include Brightmoor, Cerveny, Durfee, and East Warren, typical residential areas that comprise some of the most impoverished areas in Detroit. This project included multiple phases starting in summer 2004, and continuing through fall 2004, summer 2006, and fall 2006. The project was undertaken by a junior architecture studio. Key project collaborators included four middle schools; four community development corporations; a museum of African American history; an art college; various city departments; local business owners; community residents; and professional firms in architecture, urban design, and planning.

This paper demonstrates an approach that could lead the way to future studies of potentially important areas in school-community collaboration that focuses on revitalization and master planning.

Fig. 1: Existing conditions (East Warren)

Method

Our study sites, typical underserved residential areas in Detroit, have a far greater number of children per household than do suburban communities, according to the city planning department's reports. Various studies (Bell, 2004; Race & Torma, 1998) suggest that child-related issues are among the most worrisome to residents in poor communities. Moreover, despite extensive empirical research (Gifford, 2002) on children's behaviors towards and perceptions of the built environment, children's inputs into community revitalization are rarely studied or implemented in architecture projects. (Kids Consortium, 2001).

Additionally, urban and social scientific perspectives are too infrequently applied in current undergraduate architectural

education despite empirical findings supporting the benefits that such perspectives provide to architectural design (see, for example, Telford, 2001). Mullahey, et. al (1999) suggest that contemporary community outreach programs often neglect urban design projects. Research in the service-learning field by Crews (1995) indicates that college students have much to learn by coaching young children. Young people and children are greatly attracted to visual media and are skillful at using it to express themselves (Orton et. al., 2001; Cooke, 2005).

Based on these findings, we proposed a community outreach design studio program in which junior architectural students would engage children in active participation as key players in community master planning and architectural design, utilizing video, art, urban design, and social science perspectives. The lack of adequate theory, research, and practice concerning children's participation in community master planning led to the conclusion that a multi-faceted approach to the development of the studio project could yield useful results and lead future studies in this important area in fruitful directions.

Phase 1 (Summer 2004): Inquiry by Impression Through Kids' Cam
[observational evidence collected by the children through videos]

Junior architecture students led teams of three seventh-grade children from local communities on walks through their neighborhoods. There were four teams, each of which observed each of the four selected communities. While videotaping, children in the teams casually engaged in dialogue about their neighborhoods.

Phase 2 (Summer 2004): Formal Preunderstandings
[environmental variables and theoretical constructs explored]

After finishing Phase 1, each team returned to its respective local middle school and began "deconstructing" the recorded videos. While analyzing the images and dialogues, the architectural students helped the children to group various physical features that were frequently mentioned into several categories. Likewise, the students were instructed to find themes running through the children's dialogues and images by asking questions about things like sustainability, responsibility, and so forth.

Phase 3 (Summer 2004): Therapeutic Art Exercise
[helped the students and children to make a smooth transition to next phase]

Each child team member drew a map of his or her community according to the students' instructions. (The children conducted this exercise again at the end of Phase 7 for pre- and pro-test comparison). The architectural students also created art work to express their feelings about the study neighborhoods, to analyze neighborhood characteristics, and to share their hopes about the project. The goal of this exercise was to give children and architectural students a "therapeutic" opportunity to reduce anxiety and organize their thoughts for the next phase.

Phase 4 (Summer 2004): Model-making Exercise
[children's model of ideal community constructed]

First, each team brainstormed concepts of the ideal community. Children were asked to write down ideas and play with pieces of foamcore. Children then began making scale models of their ideal community. The students guided children in making the best use of the ideas that came out of the video and art exercise.

Phase 5 (Summer 2004): Editing and Viewing of Videos

Each team, led by its architectural student member, spent a couple of weeks editing the videos for public viewing. All team members, the children's parents and teachers, school principals, local community development corporations, residents, and the university faculty gathered to view the videos produced by the four teams.

Phase 6 (Fall 2004 and Summer 2006): Developing the Children's Ideas into Workable Community Masterplan Concepts (research conducted on the "urban agriculture-based community" theme)

After our studio carefully studied the children's inputs that were given through videos and the model-making exercise, it became clear to our studio-community team that the theme of an urban agriculture-based community ran through several concepts for the master plans for our study sites as the most effective and original approach to addressing the extensive blight caused by vacant lots and buildings across many of Detroit's residential areas. To further explore the idea of urban agriculture, architectural students conducted thorough research on urban agriculture-based developments.

Phase 7 (Fall 2004 and Fall 2006): Incorporation of Children's Inputs and Research Outcomes into Specific Community Master Plan Strategies

The outcomes of Phase 6 of the research project gave empirical support to the concerns of the children in our project: the impact of the physical environment on their own health such as obesity-related health problems that result from an unhealthy built environment.

The idea of an urban agriculture-based community became stronger and more convincing as the project team members systematically studied the children's statements and the outcomes of research on urban farming and the impact of the physical environment on people's heath. In particular, there seemed to be a strong connection between the benefits of urban farming on poor communities and the goal of helping to create a built environment that promotes a healthy lifestyle in an earth-friendly setting.

Building on the outcomes of the research, as well as on the feedback of children and other stakeholders, teams of architectural students, guided by studio faculty, developed master plan proposals for East Warren (selected as a test site) based on the theme of sustainable urban agriculture. Taking the steps mentioned above, the architectural students fine-tuned their community master plan proposals and architectural designs for the proposed urban agriculture education center and community market.

Master Plan Concept

The greater part of East Warren is proposed as an urban agriculture-based community and is divided into several sub-areas or districts according to a ¼-mile walking distance. Each district features a district or neighborhood center that includes neighborhood services and urban agriculture developments (e.g., farms, greenhouses, etc.). These centers are also connected with a pedestrian network across the entire area. Besides these features, the proposed urban farming community will include a model house that supports a healthy lifestyle, a running track and sports field, various open spaces, and office and retail facilities that will accommodate urban agriculture.. Moreover, the master plan called for incorporating existing institutional resources and amenities such as churches, schools, recreation centers, YMCAs, and other local assets into the collaborative approach to urban farming development.

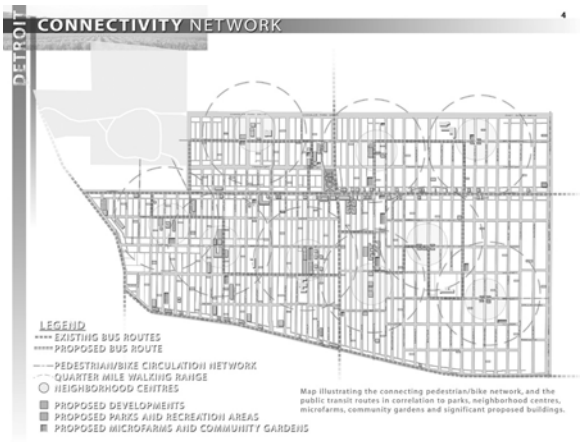

Fig. 2: Sample master plan drawing (for East Warren)

Architectural Design Concept for an Urban Agriculture Education Center and Community Market

This center is planned to lie at the heart of the urban agriculture community in East Warren as the major facility of the proposed

farming community. This central facility will educate youth and community residents about the value of a healthy lifestyle and the impact of the built environment on people; promote urban agriculture development as a catalyst for community revitalization; and provide services for residents interested in developing agriculture-related small businesses. In this center, local residents and minority farm owners from the outskirts of Detroit will be able to sell their agriculture products.

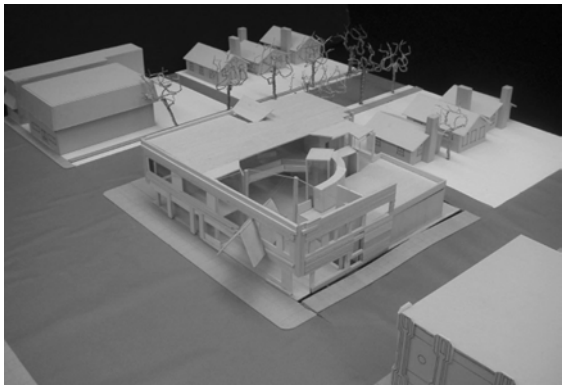

Fig. 3: Sample architectural proposal for an urban agriculture education center and community market

Conclusion

We do not claim that a child-based feedback system is better than an adult-based process, nor did we include children as the only major stakeholders in our project. However, given the demographic, social, and physical characteristics of our sites, we felt that incorporating the children's inputs is a very significant strategy in the revitalization of distressed communities.

Children were asked to draw a map of their respective communities at the end of Phase 7. The outcomes of this exercise were compared with those of the exercise conducted in Phase 3. The goal of this pre- and post-test was to see whether there was any change in children's perspectives on or attitudes toward their physical surroundings and revitalization. The post-test showed that the maps produced in Phase 7 were more detailed and more fine-tuned.

The most important lesson our students and the participating communities learned was that children do care a lot about what is going on in their neighborhoods and they know clearly the problems that the neighborhoods face, the negative outcomes of such problems, what they want to change in their communities, and what their responsibilities are. Most of all, the children have many fresh ideas. We hope our approach inspires other schools to develop additional successful systems in their community outreach programs in the future.

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