
Taking Design Out of Studio

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We are very hopeful that the current times, as outlined in the call for this panel, represent a commitment to bring together the academy and the profession in a re-envisioning of what our next generation of architects will see as their place in a world out of balance. We share this vision and believe that we must see the two, the pedagogic and the professional, more as one. It is a time of crisis in the architectural world just as it is in almost every sector of the current economy. Crisis must be seen as a time of opportunity and in our case the greatest opportunity rests in a new hybrid vision for what we see as a new professional academy model. It is a primary, if untapped, objective of the AIA and there are new ideas in the academy that seem to offer up the training to prepare those entering the profession to lead. The opportunity rests in the Architectural profession and the Academic community coming together to reclaim responsibility for some of the rampant and disastrous development that now characterizes our landscape. It rests in re-understanding our scope of influence and answering all of the questions that seem to have been abdicated to the developer, to political and economic speculation, and to entropy. It is now that we must not rest but revisit and revise our entrenched habits and assumed modes of operation. At issue are two major fault lines:

1. The fact that so many of our graduates do not go on to become Architects and that this has not led us to expand the notion of architect but to accept our diminishing ranks.

2. The impact of the large-scale developer model on our built environment and, again, our failure to expand our own self-definition to embrace this challenge. The practice of architecture sits alongside one of the greatest generators of wealth throughout time: land speculation and development. Yet while the architect's are the expertise, the poetics and the conscience of these operations we remain talent for hire and rarely come to organize the game. With an enlightened client great things can happen. But if the world we all seem to live in is the evidence, it is rare to have this occasional relationship overcome the odds in favor of the civic good. It remains a perpetual hope. We hold on to a very traditional definition of ourselves, our profession and our system of education. The consequence is that we marginalize our skill-set in a changing world and abdicate our responsibility to lead our communities in these areas.

In our downtown we have been working towards these goals and are at a hinge point in the development of a pilot project. We will first outline projects of the past six years that have laid the groundwork for our current initiatives. Then, we will show our current work in which we are developing these previous efforts to organize the structure that will carry us into the next phase. Finally, we will sketch out our efforts to grow this project into a sustainable, non-profit that can be a significant player in urban re-development projects. We are trying to accomplish this growth without sacrificing the agility and directness that characterizes our early work.

I. POSITION STATEMENT

By maintaining financial control, we maintain creative control. It's not exactly rocket science, but it's surprising how hard it is to maintain this discipline, and how many have failed.¹
Bruce Mau

Our built environment has long been ample evidence of a disastrous failure in our culture's design education and still we have no workable solution to seriously challenge the current condition. The predicament, much like that of the architect trying to 'design' down the cost of low-cost housing, is misidentified. In the academy we fail to integrate the economic as part of the design problem and then we see overcompensation in the profession. There must be an overlap zone between the academy and the profession that more pro-actively manages both of these concerns.

In the production of the built environment it is the interplay between design and economics that is so poorly managed and has such disastrous consequences. Because we professionally distribute the problems to reduce liability our social and cultural product is too easily offered sacrificially as an act of propitiation. Consequently, these two areas of concern, design and finance, are often at odds with each other and too readily become mutually exclusive agendas. Habitually set up as polemical opposites, we assure our problem in the very stating of the profession.

These observations are not new and over the last twenty years we have seen the development of a number of clear responses to the dilemma through a series of initiatives at many schools of architecture. Auburn's Rural Studio is the classic example that prioritizes the social /cultural aspects while relatively new examples such as Woodbury's Real Estate Development program seek to solve the economic side in order to leave the designer less encumbered. The question is how to put our students, and our professionals, in the best position to activate change in the built, or any other, environment. Our experience has led us to the belief that the way forward will be more collaborative, more multi-disciplinary and organized on the model of studio-based pedagogy. The goal must be cultural but the vehicle will be economic. The evidence, as Bruce Mau's quote above suggests, shows how deceptively difficult a line this is to walk. The pilot

program we have developed to accomplish these goals is outlined below and organized around a structure in which we have developed a non-profit within the context of the University and work with other non-profit clients as well.

II. SEED PROJECTS

The Outreach Center is a non-profit organization that assists the homeless and those in need in an eight parish region of Southwestern Louisiana. The Outreach Center meets the basic needs of over 60 people per day as well as attempts to return its clients to fulfilling, self-sustaining lives. In the Fall of 2003, the Center's director, Valerie Keller, requested the help of the School of Architecture and Design in developing an overall space utilization plan and in particular, designing a storage system to aid in organizing donations. Visiting the site—a city block full of sprawling, disconnected structures—made the students aware of a terrible irony: while the Center's mission is "Giving People Back Their God-Given Dignity," the physical environment and facilities were depressing, coarse, and spiritually degrading.

The design intent that emerged was twofold: first, to generate an ambitious and comprehensive long-range master plan, and second, and most importantly, to immediately design and fabricate a series of small, modest, inexpensive and strategic elements, which would address urgent needs and offer the clients, staff, and designers a foretaste of the overall vision. The goal was not to wipe the slate clean, even if possible, but instead bring a critical, heuristic process to bear upon the existing cultural and physical site.

The design methodology for the individual fabrications began like most studio projects in the School of Architecture and Design. Consistent with the notion of improvisation, there was no studio brief or preconceived endgame. With improvisation comes risk, and a letting go of prescriptive assumptions. It is through risk that innovation and unexpected consequences can occur. Therefore, even in a design-build project where capital and client-trust were at stake, improvisation and acceleration became key ingredients.

In order to overcome the inertia of the too-long-settled neglect and decay of the site, Accelerated Fabrication was adopted as a tactical approach.

This strategy was selected to prevent the fate of most altruistic master plans, which initially generate much enthusiasm and raise high expectations only to fade away quickly without much impact. Five Accelerated Fabrications were built over the course of several weeks in the spring of 2004 and a larger façade installation was carried out during the summer semester of 2004. The small projects began to have an almost immediate effect: clients began to take notice and offer ideas of their own and the Center's administrators were pleased to see immediate results from their investment and trust. For students and faculty, the fast-track process yielded a sustained vigor and motivation that continues to propel the project forward. Over 20 projects have been designed and built so far, ranging from outdoor benches and an amphitheater, to the recent renovation of a metal warehouse into the Recovery Action Center, their chemical dependency clinic.



Figure 1: Recovery Action Center Dorms

III. TRANSITIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We're to look forward to a world economy, he wrote, "defined and directed from many places and by many peoples."²

Our initial accelerated fabrications have recently blossomed into a series of more substantial projects that have required more planning, larger collaborative groups and greater faith in the process by all involved. Because of the trust built with the Outreach Center, we have an opportunity to build a public bathroom pavilion to an existing warehouse this coming summer. The 30,000 sq. ft. brick warehouse (located adjacent to the OC campus) was purchased with federal funds for a projected mixed-use, mixed-income housing development.

In the meantime the OC plans to renovate a section of it for event-rental, thus the need of public restrooms. With this project we put in place a new model based on the teaching hospital of the medical profession. With the help of graduate students in their final semester and some recently graduated all acting as interns, we designed and detailed this structure in a professional capacity.

Our second substantial project is the Recovery Action Center: a full service center, which provides access to housing, employment and addiction treatment. In addition, it offers public showers, bathrooms and washers and dryers to the homeless. For this we renovated a previously empty, 2,400 sq. ft. segment of a steel warehouse. This was accomplished in a more informal manner but established an essential prototype of how the collaborative partners may work in an accelerated fashion in larger scale projects. The third project is the Recovery Action Center Dormitories and was schematically designed under the teaching hospital model. This project represents a significant jump to 40,000 sq. ft. and a need for the full range of consultants that go into a more traditional architecture project. As the risk increases we have had to formalize and professionalize our operation without losing its essential character. Our interns have taken the schematic designs and are helping to present the proposal to the Board as well as support fund raising efforts. To manage the requirements of this project we are looking to partner with a local architectural firm that will produce the construction document set with one of our teaching hospital alumni who worked on the project as a lead. We look to be on schedule to make this happen and start construction within a year. As we establish this professional relationship we will formalize it into a second half of the teaching hospital model. As we formalize this collaborative relationship with the architectural community and establish a business model independent of our work with the OC we will become key bearers of some of the financial risk and, as Bruce Mau conjectures, maintain creative control by maintaining financial control.

IV. CIVIC DEVELOPMENT COLLABORATIVE

Our profession has inherited an unfortunately fragmented design and development. It is a process broken into numerous constituent parts and run by

many different entities such as developer, architect, politician, educator and client (and this only the first tier of a multi-tired process). Outcomes are rarely satisfactory on more than one of these levels and because the economic rewards of this process are so unevenly distributed we end up with very predictable outcomes. This fragmentation also prevents the kind of accelerated action we believe is instrumental to changing the way development happens in this country. This fragmentation systematically reduces architecture's and the architect's ability to negotiate the practical, the poetic and the ethical – a role we are specifically educated to play. This outcome takes many forms but one unfortunate by-product is the difficulty for anything like an 'accelerated action' within the community. The architectural education fails to empower them to see the kind of risk-taking that is associated with development activity as part of their fundamental skill set. We need to redefine our self-definition as architects starting with how we are educated. What needs to be designed is a hybrid practice academy. The replicable prototype for this that we share with you here is the **Civic Development Collaborative (CDC)**.

This non-profit has a tripartite mission and three corresponding components:

Mission / component:

- I. Develop a new practice academy educational paradigm
- II. Establish a socially and culturally based criterion for development that is sustainable
- III. Develop communities of people

Mission I: Develop a new practice academy

Teaching Hospital model:

Based upon recent surveys, the number of interns becoming licensed has dropped significantly. The reasons for this statistic are many. However, the gap created by the Intern Development Program (IDP) between the academies and the profession may be one such factor. As architectural educators, we see the potential to bridge this gap by beginning internship earlier in the career of architectural students as the equivalent teaching hospital.

In teaching hospitals, the doctors in training are known as residents. However, there are distinct differences in the roles and interaction of an architectural intern and a resident doctor. A medical resident is given the respect of already attaining the status of a doctor. Intern architects are placed on the lowest level of an office hierarchy, often at the same level as clerical staff.

A medical resident is given the opportunity to test and develop her skills in situations that span the whole range of practice. An architectural intern is usually given a limited scope of menial tasks.

A resident is given the freedom, and indeed is required to perform extensive clinical observation and critical analysis. On the other hand, architectural interns are often discouraged from offering critical analysis and are not able to contribute critical work.

Physicians must be skilled in interpersonal communication, in professionalism, in the accessing and evaluation of information, in delivery of medical care within a complex professional and societal framework, and most of all, in the ability to deliver "compassionate care". The latter is a crucial quality of good doctors, who go beyond fixing a diseased body the way a mechanic fixes a broken car, instead treating the whole patient with compassion and respect. However, like many competencies, it is impossible to assess on such multiple-choice tests as the Board Exams.³

The potential benefits of the residency model are many: First, the academy is linked with the profession. Second, the intern is allowed to gain an initial "taste of the profession" while maintaining a level of security in an academic setting. The enthusiasm of exploring and learning is not "squashed" by applying the "realities" of the profession too quickly. Finally, just as a patient in a teaching hospital benefits from the intensive additional care and preventative medicine which residents offer, communities will benefit from a new legion of architectural residents.

Mission II: Establish a socially and culturally based criterion for development that is sustainable

Although every institution lists its human values and its mission statement, these are often operationally set aside, only to be resurrected during retreats or when public declarations are required.⁴



Figure 2: RAC Resource Center

Design has recently been discovered as being good for business; we need to find a way to see business as good for design. The studio model of pedagogy is one of the strongest links we have to the processes we call culture. And, it is in the studio that we have a reflection of what we talk about when we talk about sustainable processes. It is time to understand the studio-based pedagogy as not unique to architectural education but a beta for a more general education and, in particular, for the re-development of the civic sphere. This happens as we begin to equate finance with design. The Civic Development Collaborative begins this process by understanding our ability to affect the design of our built fabric in a more comprehensive, holistic and interdependent way through a real-world process of development that is based in a new and deepened relationship between the architectural profession and the academy.

Community Model:

Throughout the beginning stages of our work we have developed our program through a series of projects with just a handful of non-profits in our community. As the work we have shown attests, these relationships have served us and the non-profits we have worked with very well. In each relationship we found partners with a shared vision and together we made change happen. As we explained about our intentions with the earlier accelerated fabrications, the short-term architectural output was not about solving the problems we were facing. We knew, especially in the communities in which we were working, that solutions are never short term. Our communities have suffered chronic and long standing problems and the solutions will not be delivered to them. Long-term, sustainable solutions will only be delivered by the community themselves through processes they partake in

and help to develop because it is through these processes that culture is built. Our efforts in these projects were to begin to bring together a community of people and unite them with a shared vision through the real changes we made happen. Now, seven years later, we have the evidence that this is a viable way to start long-lasting change.

In order to grow our operations we have begun discussions with a land bank in formation in our community. This relationship holds the potential access to property that is being translated from a distressed and unused state into a productive and active component of a community in transition. Through a relationship with the city and the land bank and a granting of these properties we will have the down payment that we can leverage into significant re-development projects and begin our work in starting this process in the community at large.

It is in the studio-based pedagogy of the architectural education that we have a way of seeing and re-

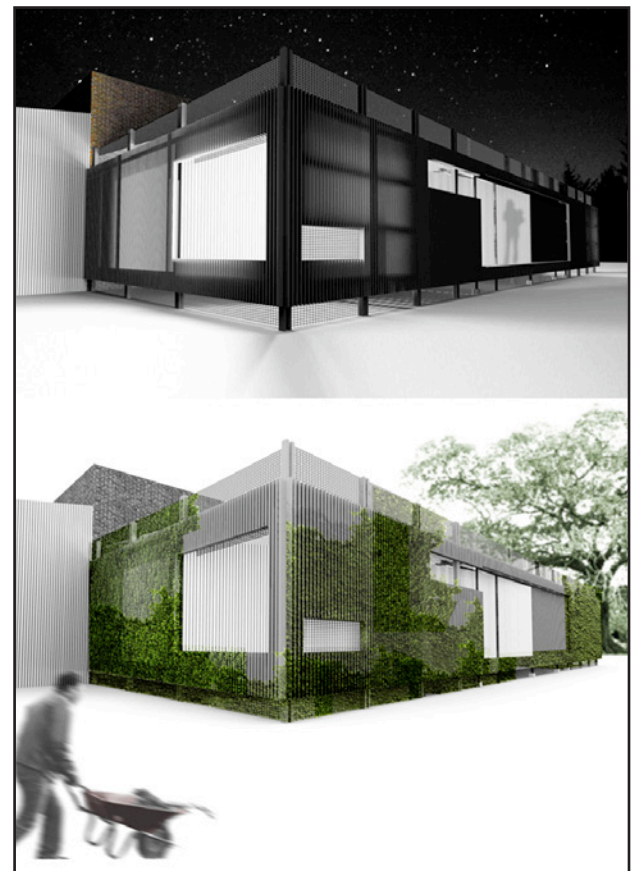


Figure 3: public bathroom pavilion

lating to our world that can resist the uncontrollable and rapacious Enlightenment habits that we have developed into science. Design studios strive towards multi-disciplinary inputs and output. They subvert the traditional hierarchy between student and teacher and allow the student to introduce potential content. In the studio setting the student is asked to establish his or her own position and then to bring in more and alternate information against which to test it. In this way the format transcends the simple transfer of knowledge and creates a space where new processes and knowledge can find fertile ground. It requires deep cooperation and collaborations. It is a process that emphasizes exploration over reduction. The studio engenders a process that makes judgments to understand and appreciate difference as opposed to making judgments to bring these into line. It is time to bring this philosophy of design out of the studio into our forsaken downtowns.

Mission III: Develop communities of people – Maximize Public Discourse

Culture is really a set message about how we should operate in the world. It imposes the political imperative upon each of us to get with the program, and the program requires that we become highly instrumental.⁵

Educational Outreach:

The idea of a practice academy as a much needed hybrid between the architectural education and the practice of architecture is only the beginning. If our goal really is to transform our urban centers and revive a sense of the *civitas* then the third and essential leg is the communities that currently and will in the future make up these areas. We envision an education mission through these building projects that will disseminate key information to empower these neighborhoods to maximize their potentials in a similar manner as our accelerated fabrications did for the OC. Through discussion groups, billboards that use accessible graphics to communicate the big picture for the community and local partnerships we see our work being the first chorus in a round that will be carried forth by the community themselves and in this way, make the work we begin a sustainable process based in community. The individuals in the community will literally be able to 'buy into' this project.

One method for a buy-in is to use a legal structure like a community land trust (CLT). A CLT is premised on the horizontal division of property ownership

and allows individuals to own a home while the CLT owns the property. Home become subsidized because only the dwelling is purchased. Through this structure we could develop small, feasible projects, sell them through the CLT to interested parties in the community, and create a community who is vested in our efforts and accelerate our fabrication.

Our public discourse has been minimized to the consequence that we cannot effectively process and respond to what is happening to our environment or to us. Culture as an active agent has been effectively neutered. The dilemma of sustainability, and the relevance of culture are not primarily how we act in our world, but how we think through our world. For the contemporary *civitas* we are in a passive construction overrun by 'charts graphs and statistics'.

Studio based design education, however, offers a generative means of resistance to the actuarial tendency and a pedagogic approach to educating ourselves beyond our current crises. When we look at pedagogy in studio-based design curriculums we see examples tending towards non-linear, intuitive and improvisational means of acquiring and organizing knowledge; but in our current trajectory in dealing with our environment and other large-scale crisis, a kind of actuarial position that tends towards linear, reductive and problem-oriented ways of organizing information dominates. It is a failure of imagination to successfully interpret the abstraction that our world has become. The extension of the studio-based design process can be expanded to help reorganize and revolutionize how business is done.

The future masters of technology will have to be lighthearted and intelligent. The machine easily masters the grim and the dumb. -Marshall McLuhan

ENDNOTES

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4. Peter Block, *The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting On What Matters*, 1st ed. (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001) 139.