Rebuilding a Community: Social Justice, Diversity and Design

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The question of how architecture schools are addressing the diverse world in which future emerging professionals will practice is essential to consider. In order to prepare students that can design for all communities and constituencies, they must be exposed to these challenging environments through revised pedagogies and address social issues in their design process and methods. These diverse environments challenge students' preconceived notions of what design is, and can be applied in serving both the top 2% who can afford the services of an architect, and the 98% without access to architects in the United States.[1]

THE CITIZEN ARCHITECT

The idea of architecture schools providing a context to address and design for social issues is certainly not new and prevalent across the country in both community design and design-build studios. A primary example of these studios is Auburn University's Rural Studio, located in impoverished Hale County in Western Alabama. Samuel Mockbee, co-founder of the Rural Studio, described the purpose of the studio is to examine how architectural practice might be challenged with a deeper democratic purpose of inclusion. In his words:

> "Our focus is on the role an architect should or would play in providing quality of life to all citizens, both underserved and overprivileged. This role should be given a purpose where architects stand for solutions that service a community's physical and social needs, and not just the complacent status quo. So the Rural Studio has turned to the study of what could make architecture more creditable through the role of the citizen architect." He further describes the context and role of the citizen architect in practicing architecture:

> "The practice of architecture not only requires the active individual participation in the profession, but it also requires active civic engagement. The architect's primary emotional connection should always be with place, and not just the superficial qualities of place, but the ethical responsibility of shaping the environment, of breaking up social complacency and energizing one's community. It is not prudent for the architect to sit back and rely on the corporate world, science, and technology experts to decide what problems to address. It is in our own self-interest to assert our ethical values and our talents as citizen architects."[2]

In this definition of the citizen architect, diversity of both people and place are united in an effort to improve social and living conditions. Within the School of Architecture, we have been inspired by the writings and *thoughts in action* of Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio. We are seeking to educate architecture students as citizen architects - exposing them to the challenges and opportunities of working within an impoverished neighborhood adjacent to campus (figs 1,2).

RATIONALE

In *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (commonly referred to as "*The Boyer Report*"), 39% of students selected: *improving the quality of life in communities* or *improving the built environment* as their most important reason for entering the architecture profession.[3] Considering that these desires are altruistic and reflect the architect's ethical responsibility of serving for the advancement of the public realm, the education of architecture students should be rooted with community based experiences and a comprehensive education.

The education of students in a National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) accredited program requires that students meet learning objectives in 32 different criteria.[4] The array of skills that are accumulated meeting these criteria in required coursework and in the studio, produces a comprehensive problem-solving and creative individual that can address complex problems. Diversity is addressed within these criteria (A.10), but a community based experience is not specifically included within an accredited program. This experience should be included to meet this criterion and other related criteria addressing social issues (C.6, C.8, and C.9). A community based experience will also meet the needs of communities, while satisfying the desire of students to improve these environments.

CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY

Figure 1: Housing conditions in the neighborhood

Our city has 21,000 residents and approximately 11,000 university students. According to the 2000 census, 12.4% of all U.S. residents live in poverty. In our city, 32.1% of residents live in poverty (1 out of 3 residents). In total, the city has 974 families living in poverty.[5] A majority of these residents live in the impoverished community immediately adjacent to the campus, *South of California Avenue* (SOCA). The 20% higher poverty rate in the SOCA community when compared to the U.S. national average presents a challenge and an opportunity for positive social change in our city.

The educational attainment in our city provides a direct contrast to the poverty statistics. 27.0% of U.S. residents have a Bachelors degree or higher level of educational attainment, while in our city,

39.6% have achieved this level of education.[6] The roughly 1 in 3 relationship to poverty (32.1%) and education attainment (39.6%) provides the expertise and ability to establish partnerships and direct resources to address the inherent social problems within this impoverished neighborhood.

We believe that architects (faculty and students) need to take a leadership role to begin to establish these partner relationships to provide the vision for a better community and challenge the status quo. This is in the spirit of Mockbee who stated, "It will take the subversive leadership of academics and practitioners who keep reminding students of the profession's responsibilities."[7] This transformation will result from partnerships with residents, community leaders, social services, the university, and city leaders.

How might a community design studio adapt to address the context, place and social conditions within a neighborhood adjacent to campus? What would have to be done to improve the living conditions, social services, educational attainment, career training, job placement, and opportunities for residents? These are the issues that we are confronting and challenging through the SOCA project.

INITIATIVE

Figure 2: Close-up of house in the neighborhood

The School of Architecture has developed two individual programs as significant components of its service-learning and social justice initiatives: the Community Design Assistance Center (CDAC) and the 5th Year Design/Build Studio (5th Year). CDAC

has served as a design and planning resource for numerous towns, villages, and non-profit organizations throughout the region that would typically not have access to professional services in their efforts to plan and envision their futures. These projects have involved large scale *visioning* efforts as well as proposals that have addressed specific planning issues and opportunities in various communities, and often serve to aid communities and organizations in securing funding and or grant commitments. 5th Year has also developed into a much appreciated community resource having, in conjunction with various partner organizations, designed and executed numerous projects of an increasingly complex and demanding scope. These projects have ranged from various outdoor learning and study environments, to the homes designed and built in partnership with Habitat for Humanity over the past four years.

Since 2001, these two distinct, yet complementary service-learning initiatives have realized over 80 design projects and 15 built projects that have supported and enhanced our region's communities, institutions and non-profit organizations, while engaging over 200 architecture students. After years of working independently, CDAC and the 5th Year have developed this new collaborative, multi-scale, long-term project adjacent to the campus. This proximity provides a unique, local, in-need community that is readily accessible and can be served by the School of Architecture.

This initiative represents a new model of education where architecture students (under the close supervision of faculty) are placed in a leadership role of a multidisciplinary team to provide positive social change for a community. In this capacity, the role of the architect is further enhanced and the community realizes more value in what an architect brings to the design table.

Indeed, the SOCA project places *Design* (the big 'D') in an equal proportion to the resources needed to address many pressing issues within the neighborhood (social issues, educational attainment, career training, job placement, etc.). In this capacity, it ultimately is *Leadership* that takes the place of *Design* that unites and addresses all of these issues.

The SOCA project is proposed to be 20 years in order to accommodate the time it will take to create a self-sustaining neighborhood. The SOCA student alumni will continue to be updated on the progress within the neighborhood and will be invited back to provide their input on the progress. The project is intended to establish a legacy for student participants within the School of Architecture in which alumni will continue to be a part of the outreach (through service and/or financial contributions).

The inspiration to do this kind of work is echoed in the words that Samuel Mockbee spoke about James Chaney. James was a civil rights worker that was killed in Mississippi during the summer of 1964 who risked his life accepting responsibility. Mockbee said, "As architects, painters, teachers, we are also given a gift and with it a responsibility. And the question for us is the same as it was for James Chaney: Do we have the courage to make our gift account for something?"[8]

CURRICULUM

The School of Architecture is currently transitioning from a five-year Bachelor of Architecture (BArch), to a four plus one Master of Architecture (MArch) program. During the fourth year of the Bachelor of Science in Architectural Studies (BSAS) curriculum, students have the choice of participating in a Design/Build studio or taking a competition studio. The aforementioned 5th Year Design/Build Studio will transition into the 4th Year, thus continuing this initiative.

In addition to the core curriculum, BSAS candidates must also complete 400 clock hours of architectural practice experience or architecturally related community service. CDAC can be taken to earn both clock hours and elective course credit. The prerequisite for the course is completion of second-year studios. The course may also be taken by graduate students.

THE PROCESS

The SOCA project began during Winter Quarter 2008. It will proceed by working through these phases. Because it is a long-term (20 year) project, it is noted that the following is a cyclical process and not linear in nature.

1. UNDERSTANDING – Discovery, Research, Documentation

2. AWARENESS – Promotion of Problems, Community Contacts
3. EXPERTISE – Best Practices, Precedents, Lecture Series
4. PLANNING – Charrettes, Community Discussion, Roundtable Meetings, Fundraising
5. DESIGN – Design with: Community, University, City
6. IMPLEMENTATION – Build Proposed Projects, Fundraising

Phase 1 (*Understanding*) was completed during the Winter and Spring Quarters in 2008. The students reviewed data and statistics from the census and city records. They then created photo documentation of the neighborhood and reviewed compelling photos in the classroom. Posters with quotes were created to express their thoughts and feelings for the living conditions they encountered (fig. 3).

Phase 2 (*Awareness*), was started during the Fall Quarter 2008 and has been ongoing. During this phase, the students have created a PowerPoint to present to city and community leaders and resource organizations to establish awareness and to develop long-term partnerships. To date, students have presented to the Mayor, the Economic Development Director, Aldermen (City Councilmen), Partners in Prevention (a social service awareness organization), Kiwanis, university departments, churches, and a number of other community groups. Each group has offered to lend support to assist our efforts.

With the understanding that grassroots efforts begin at the grassroots, the students working on the SOCA project have developed *social design interventions* to address awareness and gain support. The first event was a block party with residents and community partners in November 2008 in a local church parking lot (fig. 4). Music, food, games and prizes were a part of the festivities, and students used the event to introduce themselves individually to residents and talk about our plans to improve the neighborhood. 60 people (residents and community partners) attended this kick-off event. In the future, SOCA student alumni will be invited back to the block parties to celebrate with the residents what they had previously started and what has been accomplished.

In order to continue to build relationships in the
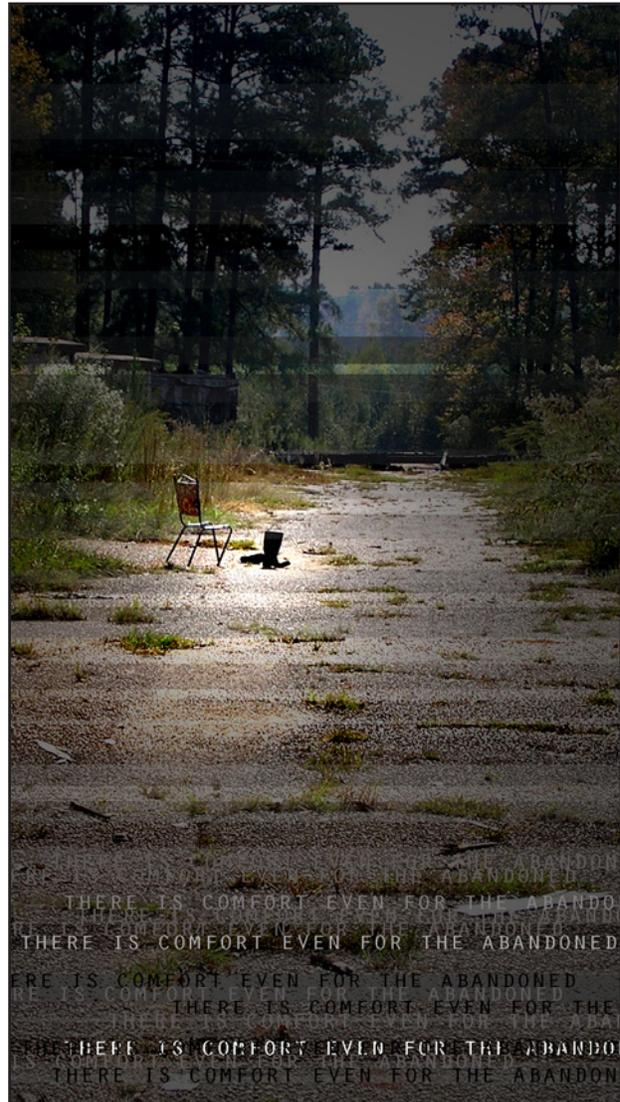
neighborhood, the students have created *Trust*

Figure 3: Student poster – Phase 1 (*Understanding*)

Builder, a student community service group that is a consortium of other student organizations that work in the neighborhood once a month doing yard work, repairs, and small construction projects. The participants are identified with *Trust Builder* t-shirts, and personal relationships with families have begun to be established through these service projects.

The latest *social design intervention* is a 5K run through the neighborhood, designed to have other residents of the city experience the neighborhood and the living conditions. This event is entitled, *SOCA Sprint 5K*, and will be held annually beginning in the Spring of 2009 (fig. 5). In association

Figure 4: Block Party

with this event, runners, supporters, and residents will be treated to a block party celebration and meal at the finish. This event is intended to have the citizens of our city come out and participate and share in being part of the solution to improve the SOCA neighborhood.

Phase 3 (*Expertise*) and Phase 4 (*Planning*) began during Fall Quarter 2009, and the project will con-

Figure 5: *SOCA Sprint 5K*

tinue with the remaining two phases. We have already begun to present the project to university departments in order to work together to establish a collaborative university service-learning initiative. The expertise within each department can collectively help to improve the SOCA neighborhood. For the students, this experience will foster an understanding about how each discipline can work together as they become emerging professionals in their chosen fields.

CURRENT PLANS

A large, local church became aware of our efforts via a presentation at a community meeting. They had recently purchased an old abandoned mobile home park in the neighborhood with plans to fill the site with Habitat for Humanity homes. They contacted us to find out about our vision and future plans. Through multiple meetings, we were able to convince them to develop the site with programmatic elements that would truly assist and meet the needs of residents. This would be a sustainable development, not only in the 'green' sense (like the proposed geothermal and solar technology), but by connecting and sustaining relationships over time. Included in the master plan for the site is a community center, park, playground, community garden, skills training center, and a design center. The design center would provide CDAC with an on-going presence in the neighborhood, and would be a location for community and class meetings, charrettes, design meetings with families, and a communication center for future plans. Groundbreaking is planned to begin in 2011.

FUTURE PLANS

In the future, SOCA student alumni and recent graduates working in firms located within a one hour drive will be utilized as contacts to spread the word within their firms on what we are doing and how they can support our efforts. These former students will act as *bridges* between education and practice. Their experience working on the SOCA project will give them confidence when they begin work on their initial projects in architecture firms. In return, these firms will have hired emerging professionals that can demonstrate the value of serving and addressing the needs of underserved communities. These experiences will benefit both education and practice resulting in mentoring, volunteering, financial support and potential pro bono work - helping to leverage this type of project from alternative to mainstream. The firms participating will develop a culture of caring and enhanced camaraderie. Future pro bono projects in our community and elsewhere will ultimately be the result. Education and practice will benefit from sharing this knowledge and providing these opportunities.

OUTCOMES AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

The student learning outcomes have been very positive. They truly see that their initial contributions (to a proposed 20 year project) are already making an impact within the community and in their future career objectives.

In the words of three students:

"Where to begin? Words cannot express how I truly feel about this project. I am so excited to be a 'citizen architect' in training. I cannot wait until next quarter when we continue the process.

I now believe that CDAC should be a required course. You are in school for five years to become an architect; therefore you should be trained as an ethical architect. However, CDAC has been the first time I have been able to see first hand how one might go about seeing the world in a virtuous way. I now know that people matter, and that people – from leaders to residents – should be involved in architecture. They should be the influence that drives design. Architecture is for the people. Why not ask them what they want?"   *Graduate Student*

"Early last year I began to refocus my future career goals. For the first three and half years of my education as an architect, I never really thought about how my work could impact a community in need. After learning about organizations like Architecture for Humanity, I found my true calling in the field - designing for a purpose, people. The Community Design Assistance Center (CDAC) class has afforded me that opportunity through the South of California Avenue Project (SOCA). My participation with this project has led me to a greater understanding of the social issues that a lot of communities face and in particular, SOCA. Some of these social issues are far beyond the reach of a normal architecture student, but the project has really gotten me interested in pursuing other means of research and understanding. For instance, enrolling in a Sociology Research Methods class in order to see where community members stand in the overall picture of community design. This proves that the SOCA project has really pushed me as a student and as a person to incorporate people into architecture - to quote Samuel Mockbee, "people and place matter."
5ᵗʰ Year Student

"As an architecture student, there are three things that are drilled into your brain: DESIGN, DESIGN, and DESIGN. You are given design scenarios with hypothetical clients that could be anything but real people. Very rarely are you given a real life problem and expected to give a real world solution. After taking part in CDAC, especially while working on the SOCA project, I have learned the meaning of what architecture truly is. Is it about design? Yes. Is it about buildings? Yes. But there's more to it. Architecture is about people. Without people, architec-

ture is nothing. In school, the chance to interact and build personal relationships with real people in the real world is limited. However, this project has changed that. It has allowed me to be creative (non-architecturally) in the way we promote this project. It has been a joy! This truly has been my favorite class in architecture school… hands down!!!Because of this project, my career goals have changed. I desire to work with non-profit agencies that better our communities by helping those in need. That could be designing homes or just hanging out with the neighborhood kids. No longer do I want to be the businesswoman who works in a fancy office designing for high-profile clients. I want to be a woman who not only designs, but also makes a difference in the lives around me."   *Graduate Student[9]*

REACTIONS FROM RESIDENTS

The neighborhood that we are working within has experienced many empty promises over the last 50 years and is very skeptical of any new proposals that are presented to the residents. Therefore, our initial efforts have been focused around gaining trust and introducing ourselves and the goals of the project in a way that demonstrate that we are committed to this neighborhood for an extended period of time. The reaction from the residents has been very favorable and positive. After two years of working continuously on the project, they truly believe that we are committed to helping the neighborhood.

In the words of two residents:

"Thank you for being a part of the solution to improve this part of our city. Your efforts provide hope for the residents"   *Local Reverend*

 "Right now, with so many things going on, people are skeptical of anything new coming into the community. I've been getting calls asking about it, and I've been telling people that (the volunteers) are all right. We as elected officials appreciate the support, and we are in it for the long run."   *Elected Official[10]*

REFLECTIONS

Completing the second year of this 20 year project provides an incipient context to provide reflection. We have worked through the first two phases (*Understanding* and *Awareness*) and are beginning the *Expertise* and *Planning* phases. The success along the way of gathering support from city leaders, community groups, and social agencies has reinvigorated our efforts and provides fuel to continue our work in the neighborhood. But certainly, it is the

relationships we have developed with the residents that makes this project and the process worthwhile. We have gained trust from the residents and they look forward to working together with us to help rebuild the neighborhood. They now have hope for a better future. The residents understand part of what architecture is about - building community through personal relationships. I believe that our grassroots efforts have helped educate the SOCA residents of what architecture is and the possibility of what architecture can achieve. This in turn helps promote architects and the architecture profession through the work and education of the 98% that can not afford the services of architects. The students who are involved with the SOCA project (and similar projects across the country) will become professionals that design with a conscious – helping to transform practice by actively contributing to their communities in meaningful ways.

ENDNOTES

1.   Bryan Bell, *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 13.
2.   Samuel Mockbee, "The Role of the Citizen Architect," in *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture*, ed. Bryan Bell (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 152-156.
3.   Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996), 9.
4.   The National Architectural Accrediting Board, "2009 Conditions for Accreditation" (2009).
5.   U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.
6.   U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.
7.   Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio: Samuel Mockbee and an Architecture of Decency* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 13.
8.   Lori Ryker, *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 99.
9.   Three excerpts from student journals and quarter reports at the conclusion of the CDAC (ARCH 445/559) course.
10. Excerpts of quotes in the local newspaper.