
TRANS-ACTIVISM IN DESIGN: A CASE STUDY

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The call to activism in design has developed in myriad interesting ways since it was first articulated over half a century ago. New design activisms are expanding the agency of the professions and engaging and empowering underserved communities in the process.¹ Recasting the roles of client and professional, redefining the scope and subjects of design, and expanding the sites and time-frames of discourse, design activisms have emerged around *re-active*, *pro-active* and *trans-active* models of practice.² (Fig. 1)

THREE MODES OF ACTIVIST PRACTICE

Re-active Practice. Re-active practices are efficient and respond to need defined *a priori*: these include the modest *pro bono* professional services to community-based non-profits that form the core of the work of design centers and the donated services by for-profit practices. They also include small-scale design-build projects largely centered in universities, and high profile disaster relief and other design efforts reacting to a humanitarian emergency.³

In re-active practices the design professional appears on the scene at the behest of an on-the-ground client already fully engaged in the issues of the place and who directs the whole project in which design or design-build is a small part. Following the model of traditional consulting practice the designer works for a representative of the end-users, and operates as a creative and socially focused professional service provider. The work is prepared for the client's use, and although design products may range from a schematic pre-development drawing or a neighborhood plan, to shelters for victims of storms or earthquakes the outcome is concrete, site-specific, and developed within clear parameters of scope, time and budget.

Pro-active Practice. In the pro-active model designer engages critical social environmental issues directly, operating outside of a particular place-based organizational structure and without the defined goal of creating a building, landscape or other use-centered intervention. It can employ mappings of place-based research, critical writing, speculative design, and experimental techniques such as social media and art-based temporary installations to represent and critique the complex ecologies of place.

In its conception a project in a pro-active practice only indirectly engages the user. It remains in the purview of the designer until

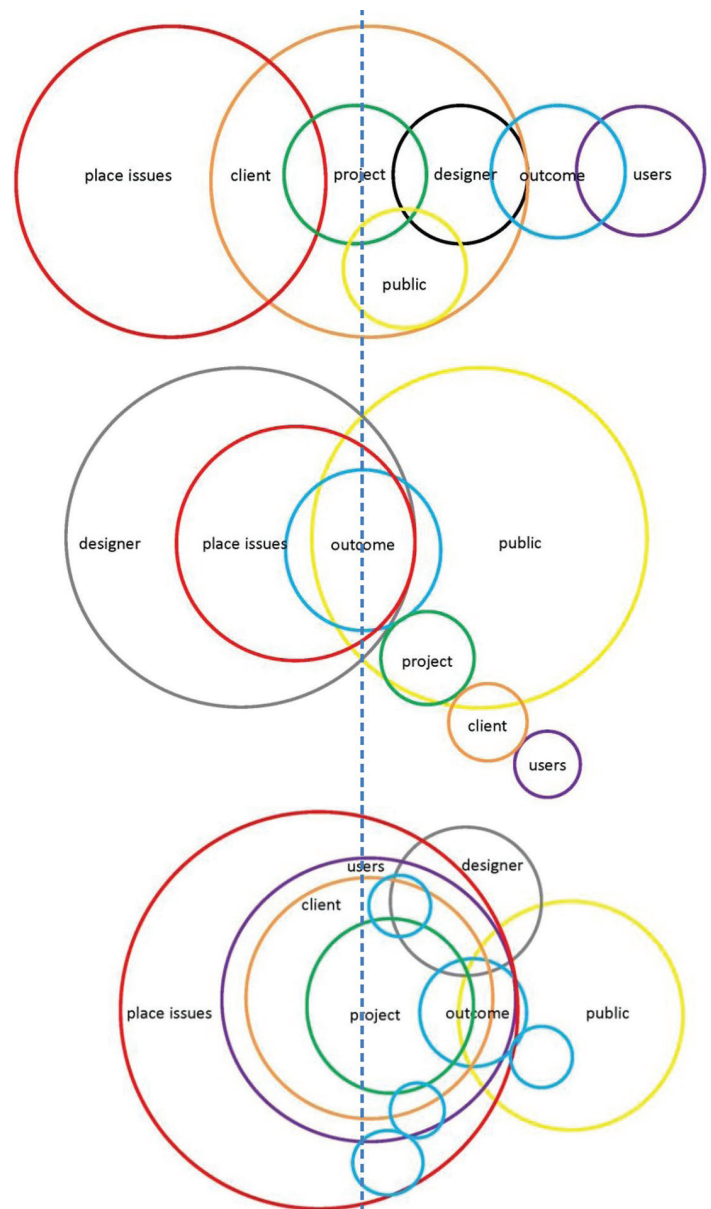


Figure 1. Diagrams of process and relationships in in design activism. Re-active practice (top); Pro-active practice (middle); Trans-active practice (bottom)

it enters the public arena where it seeks to provoke awareness of patterns of social or environmental injustice. The outcomes of this type of activist practice offer flash points for public discourse and are disseminated in highly mediated events like public exhibitions and charrettes, as well as in blogs and guerilla installations. Although the work centers on human/spatial issues, the designer's role is in identifying, representing and speculating on problems rather than solving them. According to Anu Mathur, "Activist practice means first that we are initiators. Rather than waiting for a commissioned project, we ask the first question, frame the issue and propose possibilities." ⁴

Trans-active Practice. The third and most complex, and the subject of this paper, is the trans-active practice: inefficient by intent, design evolves through a long-term commitment to a specific locale, building relationships of people to place to effect social change. In most cases a place-making "program" may consist only of a set of concerns or desires. It is through engagement in the eco-system of a place, discovering its patterns, and operating on sites of critical convergence, that potential for new growth can fully emerge.⁵

Often a trans-active process is initiated through re-active or pro-active practice. It may begin as a small commissioned intervention; its making may touch a chord of deeper significance *that if pursued* may become a catalyst for more systemic change. Or trans-active practice may evolve from research, as in Alexander's pattern language, where the carefully observed and catalogued relationships between physical space and human inhabitation can be used to make a place as a multi-scalar, integrated whole.⁷

The designers, the users, the client - and the site itself -- are constituent parts of the place-making enterprise. Negotiation around the very tangible conditions of space and place are the drivers in which participants are equally, if differently, engaged. Here the act of designing (investigating, representing, speculating, proposing) and the products of design (maps, drawings models, constructions) set the stage for unfolding discourse. Constituents move in and out of leading roles as the moment demands.

Designers in a trans-active practice neither permit themselves a safe distance from the struggle, nor abandon their professional judgment and imagination. They convene and orchestrate the collective process; they are simultaneously teachers and learners, risk-takers and moderators. Constantly challenged to articulate and situate the problems of place, the designer(s) must make critical connections between what is tangible and present and what is abstract and systemic. Teddy Cruz says we must "focus on the issues of the local . . . [for] every issue converges there"; everyday issues if carefully understood and acted upon have the existential power to "trickle up" and transform often hardened policies that obstruct development of livable space.⁶

A CASE STUDY: THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

This study of trans-active practice focuses on the Village of Arts and Humanities a unique and continuously evolving organization located in a struggling North Philadelphia neighborhood. "The Village" as it is known, is situated at the terminus of a shopping street that forms the public spine of the community. Its core area spreads out over three blocks, gently co-occupying an eroding residential fabric, once densely built up for workers in Philadelphia's industrial economy.

Both a public place and an organization, the Village is dedicated to the idea that the creative process and the presence of beauty in the everyday world can transform people's lives. Its gradual evolution demonstrates the ways in which trans-active practice can be a means for sustaining this core idea.

Site History. The site has grown organically from its first transformation in the late 1960's as the locus of an Afro-centric cultural center by dancer choreographer Arthur Hall, to its expansion between 1986 and 2004 as an extraordinary land transformation and arts education organization by the artist Lily Yeh, and after a period of stagnation, to its current development as campus for the arts and creative entrepreneurship led by the new Village director Elizabeth Grimaldi in partnership with the Urban Workshop at Temple University. The evolutionary cycles have all been steeped in the eco-systems of the place: they have engaged the end-users in its growth; have struggled to connect specific acts of building and art-making to a larger social and spiritual fabric; and have freely built upon and reinterpreted an inherited past.

When Arthur Hall founded the Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center he repurposed a dilapidated 19th century storefront building on Germantown Avenue neighborhood shopping corridor. The center was dedicated to teaching the dance and traditions of West Africa to the largely African-American population. It flourished and achieved renown through the seventies and eighties. In 1986, the neighborhood had begun to physically deteriorate and Hall invited his friend the artist Lily Yeh to make a park in the newly vacant lots next to the Center. Though inspired by the opportunity, she had no idea what this meagerly funded public art project would generate. The Ile Ife Park was built over three summers with the help of neighborhood children whom Yeh, a curiosity to their parents, had cajoled into participating.

Shortly after the park was completed, Hall's center closed. Yeh inherited the building and founded The Village of Arts and Humanities and it grew in counterpoint to the neighborhood's deterioration, reaching into and transforming the fragmented neighborhood space adjacent to the commercial corridor. Over a period of fifteen years a network of parks, gardens and alleyways with brilliant Gaudi-esque mosaic sculpture, murals and low defining walls were woven into the interstices of the residential fabric, building a new vision for celebrating the otherwise neglected "in-between". (Fig. 2) Along with the storefront building on Germantown, six abandoned row houses on tiny Alder Street were acquired and rehabilitated to house after school

arts programs and workshops. Yeh engaged neighborhood residents in the land transformation and renovation process; in particular two recovering drug users found purpose in working closely with Yeh, directing and implementing park building projects for the Village.⁸



Figure 2. The Village: The Ile Ife park with Phoenix mural on the south wall of the Germantown Avenue building (Above); Chess players and children near Angel Alley on Alder Street (Below)

The energy of the creative process being publicly enacted and Yeh's personal hands-on presence was moving to experience. "Miss Lily [Yeh] was always out and on the street. The Village was full of life" former resident and a current staff member reminisced.⁹ Scores of people drawn from the immediate neighborhood and local arts communities engaged in the work of the organization; hundreds of neighborhood children participated in dance, visual arts and theater programs. By 2001 the Village had received international and national recognition; foundation grants flowed in.

As it gained notoriety and economic support the Village dramatically expanded its scope and ambitions, moving its focus outward from the three block heart area where it had concentrated its efforts. The Village built several new parks dispersed throughout the community, and in partnership with developers, built new housing

and developed a tree farm on a large vacant site in the hopes of spurring economic development.

Perhaps a victim of its own success, the trans-activist way of place-making had begun to devolve to project-generation. Though these outlying projects carried the Village "brand" in their physical form, they were in essence isolated events, enough outside the tightly knit Village core to be disconnected from a social fabric that could sustain what Alexander calls "the growing whole". The organizational capacity of the Village proved to be inadequate to nurture all its ventures.

Lily Yeh was also expanding her own artistic reach, founding new projects in villages in Africa and Asia. In 2004 she left the directorship of the Village to pursue this international work. The departure of the charismatic leader, whose vision had infused a desolate place with energy and beauty, was a blow, and a bleak period followed. Added to this, external economic circumstances beyond the control of the Village, took a toll. Endowments of foundations, arts and greening organizations - the Village's primary funding sources- had been dealt successive blows -- in the post-9/11 period, in the real estate crisis of the mid-2000's and the present recession. The Village's operating budget like those of its fellow non-profits was deeply affected. The arts education programs central to the mission, struggled but did survive.

DIGGING DEEPER: PRESERVATION AND CHANGE

The economic downturn was particularly devastating to the residential fabric. Between 2000 and 2010, deterioration accelerated to the extent that a third of the residences in the three-block Village core were abandoned and in dangerous decay. With neither private nor public money available for rehabilitation, demolitions followed, transforming the figure-ground relations of the Village. Intimate parks that had been nestled "in-between" now stood out in the open, and there were fewer residents to enjoy them.

In 2010 with the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Village was given an opportunity to preserve its unique artistic heritage and to re-imagine itself as a community institution. A vigorous young leader had emerged after Yeh's successors -- overwhelmed by the complexity of the problems faced by the Village -- had stepped down. The new executive rallied her small staff and board, and the Urban Workshop at Temple University, which had worked with the Village since Yeh's tenure, was invited to lead the two-year design and visioning process called "Digging Deeper".

Digging Deeper had been funded through Pew's Heritage Philadelphia Program, but soon it became apparent that "preservation" as generally understood was an inadequate descriptor for what needed to be done. Indeed there was an ageing body of public space and art requiring conservation and greater public access, but there was also an intangible, dynamic, "growing" process essential to Village ethos that needed to be recaptured and re-conceptualized according to present reality.

As the Urban Workshop worked with the executive director and board to frame the project, we learned of the organization's struggles to maintain all the property that was in the Village's expansive purview. In fact the Village did not own most of the vacant land on which the outlying parks had been built, rather they had informally appropriated it. With some difficulty we made a triage decision to focus our design efforts and development planning exclusively on the three-block Village core, the primary locus of the Village's programmed activities, directly connected to the neighborhood commercial corridor and transportation networks and to dense residential neighborhoods. Healing this center could not be done only in the original tactical manner, but needed a collectively generated vision of new strategies to program, occupy, intensify and restructure the Village space. The board president reinforced this view:

There is a vibrancy that comes with doing, but having a plan with big ideas, we can focus our work on the potential of the land in a narrative of new growth... [showing] how the Village is to sustain itself through continual evolution.¹⁰

LEARNING TOGETHER

The young people who participated in the Village after school programs were our largest constituency and it felt right to initiate a visioning process with them, framing it so they would learn about design of place – their place. We began Digging Deeper with an undergraduate architecture studio whose members were only a few years older than the teens themselves; both sides adopted a posture of maturity where roles of knowledge-bearer, teacher and learner were exchanged as ideas were formulated. (Fig.3) With the architecture students the teens mapped their spatial experience in and around the Village, serving as local experts as we walked the site and neighborhood. They came to the studio and learned how to build a site model, to read drawings and to give design critiques.

We asked them about what they felt was unique to the Village, and could be built upon. The teens had not known Lily Yeh and her cohort and were unfettered by nostalgia for their artistic vision, but as inheritors, they tacitly valued the Village's unique qualities. They loved the brilliant colors that infused the outdoor spaces— one student describing his first childhood memory of the place as magical and peaceful, as though he had entered another world. The young people knew they were safe there, a feeling borne out by testimonials of members of the community who knew the terrain, and by police data that showed the Village Heart as an island of security.

The after school arts programs at the Village were growing rapidly as these extracurricular offerings became eliminated in public schools. Fashion design, dance, art and video all vied for position in the cramped, poorly illuminated space in existing storefront building on Germantown Avenue. The beautiful and expansive outdoor parks were unconnected from the students' experience during most of the school year when it was dark early, cold and snowy. There were no views offered from the highly defended buildings, and very little natural light.



Figure 3. Village teens and architecture students from the Urban Workshop studio mapping experience of the Village and its context.

Though they coped remarkably with the limited spatial resources, when asked, Village teens were vocal advocates for the new. They wanted new activities, new art forms, and new spaces. They wanted to break down walls, to see outside and to have their work seen by the neighborhood. One of the art teachers observed:

At the Village, our students and our staff make so much out of so little... what they make is mind blowing. There is a certain type of [creative] hunger that comes from this environment, but I think it's on us as the leadership to balance their hunger with incentive and reward, and capacity for more..."¹¹

THE CHANGING COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The demographics of the community at large demonstrated a compelling social need for the Village of Arts and Humanities to re-identify itself as an anchoring neighborhood institution. In its almost 300 block context area the Village was the only place that served young people with afterschool programming in the arts and other creative activities; but with all its unique public space, its buildings had the capacity to serve only a fraction of the expanding population of its neighborhood 's youth.

We learned how programming was evolving in response to changing cultural interests: traditional Africanist art forms, first taught through dance and drumming by Arthur Hall and further adapted in visual arts by Lily Yeh no longer singularly defined the Village social purposes. The emergence of new design arts, videography,

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urban farming, environmental and health education, and the opportunities presented in micro-entrepreneurship had begun to take place alongside the visual and performing arts programming that had been the staple of Village offerings.

As Digging Deeper progressed, another initiative, larger in scale and to which we were intrinsically connected, was building momentum. The city was looking to revitalize and develop the identity of the long-neglected Germantown Avenue corridor through a large scale mural arts project. The Village was situated at the southern end of the shopping district, and positioned well as the institutional anchor of this bigger vision of art as a catalyst for change.

BEYOND CONTINGENCY: ENVISIONING A CAMPUS ARCHITECTURE

We drew together the various personal narratives with the cultural and social change that was occurring all around the Village. We mapped spatial evolution/devolution, land ownership, site activity patterns, and analyzed the programmatic needs and external forces that were at play. Though the steep erosion of residential fabric and subsequent proliferation of vacant lots had in many ways undermined the cherished intimacy of the place, ultimately this proved propitious, a kind of creative destruction that allowed the Village to change its self-conception.

The Village was free to evolve from an enclave to an institution that more fully engaged the larger community. We began reimagining the core of the Village as a campus – a robust public place where a broad range of creative endeavors could be undertaken, and sustained throughout the year. For this it needed stabilizing

presence of buildings, an architecture that could structure the now untethered spaces of the Village. The unique mosaicked site walls, sculpture, parks and gardens once situated snugly in breaks within the residential fabric, were still intact and beautiful. Despite having lost their original context, we saw that these powerful remnants could be transformed and function as the infrastructure on which the text of this new campus could be inscribed.

Planning and Design Principles. We formulated set of principles for planning, designing and building that would guide our work:

- *Expand the capacity of the Village* to house new opportunities for arts education, art-making and performance; for urban farming, environmental education and health; for entrepreneurship and residencies in the arts
- *Build a public presence* and encourage greater access to the Village: develop strong thresholds to the neighborhood at multiple scales
- *Sustain and reinforce a safe haven* where creativity can flourish: define its boundaries, activate its spaces, illuminate its paths, strengthen the “24/7” residential presence
- *Create a language* of architecture and landscape design that interprets the unique qualities of the Village ethos combining tactility and porosity, color and light, human scale and natural flows
- *Make connections* between indoor and outdoor, old and new, public and private, formal and informal
- *Grow the Village campus organically.* Build simple flexible space that can support multiple use over time; think long term, but act now



Figure 4. Aerial View of the proposed vision plan seen from the northwest. The Public Threshold (upper left); the Alder Street Spine (middle, diagonal); the Workshop Courtyard (lower left); the Environmental Center (right)

The Plan. We sought emergent potential for growth in the exceptional formal, social and urban assets of the site. With a deeper knowledge of programmatic opportunities, a conceptual plan for the new Village campus was shaped around four activity nodes:

1. “The Public Threshold” along the Germantown Avenue/10th Street corridor, housing design, exhibition and performing arts spaces, a neighborhood business incubator and the iconic Ile lfe Park;
2. “The Alder Street Spine” consisting of private dwellings, artist residences, and office space for administrative and start—up organizations;
3. “The Workshop Courtyard” clustering a workshop and 3-d studio spaces around the existing Meditation Park; and
4. “The Environmental Center” on Warnock Street, dedicated to sustainable urban farming, health and environmental education.

The activity nodes, though distinct in character are interconnected, layered with old and new, and fully integrated with dedicated outdoor space. The build-up of structured activity throughout the campus not only expands program capacity but increases the potential for intensifying social interactions and creative synergies. (Fig. 5)

Thresholds, Dwellings, and Places of Production. Originally part of a continuous row of storefronts, the Germantown Avenue building sits alone at a critical bend on the shopping corridor -- an excellent opportunity to build the campus' scale and public presence with its main visual arts center at the avenue's terminus. The existing building steeped in the history of the Village, is in need of renovation. Our proposal reverses its inward focus by expanding into open lots facing the corridor with a colorful, transparent architecture that offers a new, vibrant threshold to Village visible from blocks away. (Fig. 5) On the building's south side, Yeh's monumental mural (Fig. 2) is to be restored and strategically penetrated with openings, offering views and access to the beautiful Ile lfe Park. A new theater opens into the park's opposite end.

Behind this public threshold runs Alder Street, the internal spine of the Village. Our plan conserves its intimate scale and supports the remaining residential community with renovation of vacant dwellings for visiting artists and regular residents, mixed in with Village administration, small workshops and rental office space. The neighbors' participation in events and activities, and their watchful presence in the heart of the Village need to be sustained, even as the organization evolves away from its original residential context.

Meditation Park, a lovely walled and intricately paved space links Alder and Warnock Streets. Still beautiful but unused and stripped of the tree canopy and residences that once embraced it; the park will become filled with activity as the 3-d arts and crafts courtyard. Now it will be the site of a new workshop with large garage doors that would allow the whole space to function as a productive indoor-outdoor room. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. At the edge, the Germantown Avenue building expanded (above); at the center, The Workshop in Meditation Park

A string of vacant lots along Warnock Street is the most deteriorated place in the Village Heart and offered little in the way of physical site infrastructure on which to build. The remains of repeated failed gardening initiatives were evident but the Village was determined to rebuild them. We agreed, but insisted that for productive gardening to succeed and be sustained, it could not be conceived as a contingent seasonal use; rather, the site needed both strong physical and programmatic structure and a larger social and environmental purpose. We took a cue from the only active garden -- a small spiral-shaped herb garden located at the end of the street. It possessed three key advantages that sustained it: it was clearly designed, colorful and aromatic; it was both highly productive and easy to maintain; and it had a committed partner that worked with the Village youth in a microeconomic enterprise.

We proposed an environmental center that could support year-round activity that focused on the cycle of production, health and environmental education. A large experimental gardening site would be bookended by the herb garden to the south and a program building at its north end. The building included a greenhouse, a teaching kitchen, classrooms and a maintenance space. The building would aspire to highest energy-conserving and sustainable building practices, and gardening sheds and shade pavilions dispersed through the site would harvest rainwater for the gardens.

ACTION: ACUPUNCTURE POINTS

In order to do something big...one starts with something small and starts where it counts.¹²

We recognized that in the context of extremely limited resources, future vision alone was insufficient to drive development forward; it needed to be embedded in a lived present, and catalyzed with strategic interventions that would activate and map out the sites of potential growth. Even as we discussed and formulated the vision,



Figure 6. Acupuncture points. The constructed teaching pavilion in the herb garden (above); The proposed Germantown Avenue party wall treatment (below).

we proposed small targeted interventions—acupuncture points as it were -- that would have high impact on the whole system. Some were practical, with high functional value. We reorganized the existing space use within and among the existing buildings. Basic site improvements like repairing the site walls and murals, pruning trees and clearing debris, and lighting dark potentially dangerous spots can be implemented by Village staff and volunteers.

Others are visible interventions that would enliven the public thresholds in the short term. It might be years before the expansion of the Germantown Avenue building could be realized, but its blank party wall and the ungainly fire escape could be transformed with a green wall of fast-growing ivy and colorful banners identifying the Village and extending its reach into the community's public space.

This intervention would frame informal activities on the future building site—a farmer's market or a temporary exhibition. (Fig. 6)

On the other side of the Village campus, gardens of the emerging environmental center are being built with Village staff and volunteers. Recycled construction materials form the walls of the raised garden beds, and a living fence encloses the site. They occupy long-abandoned properties that Village, with its new-found network of policy-makers, is vigorously seeking to acquire.

Faculty and students of the Urban Workshop were not content to let the project go—for us Digging Deeper has only just begun – we want to be engaged not just in the process of imagining but in making; this is at the core of the Village ethos. Collaborating with Village staff and the small business that purchases produce from their herb garden, we have constructed a teaching pavilion. Stretching the width of the site it frames the back of the herb garden, provides shade, and functions as a water harvesting device for the gardens that currently have no structured water source. (Fig 6)

Because of the illegality of building on borrowed land, its conception evolved from a permanent construction to a mobile installation. Constructed in modules, framed with galvanized steel pipe and fitted tarpaulin the pavilion can be demounted seasonally and re-installed – in parts, or all together – there or on other sites in the Village.

TRANS-ACTIVISM IN PLACE: IN TEMPOS FAST AND SLOW

The trans-active process of change in the Village has occurred in different rhythms and with different instruments and expressions. Its distinct temporal phases have been variously colored -- joyful, mysterious, expansive, faltering, violent, hopeful, bright – but all connected by an underlying ethos of finding creativity in the context of a larger struggle. Each period carries with it a past that gives itself to an unfolding future, and does so in tempos fast and slow.

Our work is a piece of this. The process and its outcomes have been built on relationships with people who care deeply about a physical place. We have found that to be fully engaged in social change,

especially in environments so challenged by poverty and spatial decomposition requires not just the production of ideas, but also of trust that comes with a commitment of time, an active presence on site - and a willingness to see problems as they are.

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FOOTNOTES

1. See: C. Richard Hatch, ed. *The Scope of Social Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Rheinhold, 1984), and Jose L. S. Gamez and Susan Rogers, "An Architecture of Change" in Bell, Bryan and Katie Wakeford, eds, *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* (Metropolis Books, 2008),
2. See: Sally Harrison, "At the Margins: Politics and Design Now" in Miller, Elizabeth and Todd Woodward, eds. *Leverage: Strengthening Neighborhoods through Design* (Philadelphia: The Community Design Collaborative, 2011) 89-91. In this essay I discussed in detail the three modes of activist practice.
3. Gamez and Rogers, 22.
4. <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/preparing-ground-an-interview-with-anuradha-mathur-and-dilip-da-cunha/13858/>
5. See Nabeel Hamdi. *Small Change: About the Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities*. London: Earthscan, 2004
6. <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/21/the-nifty-50-teddy-cruz-architect/>
7. See: Christopher Alexander, et al., *The Production of Houses*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1985.
8. Yeh, Lily. 27 February 2002. "Community Building through the Arts." Slought Foundation OnlineContent.<http://slought.org/content/11025>
9. Toler, Brenda, January 2011. personal interview
10. Alan Jacobson, May 2011, personal interview
11. Serena Saunders, January 2011, personal interview
12. Hamdi, xx