BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME: PROVIDING DESIGN AID IN OUR OWN BACKYARD

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INTRODUCTION

International crises capture the attention of socially-aware design professionals. These instances often bring out the best in design practitioners, but just as frequently result in design interventions which, while well-intended, range from misguided to patronizing. Designers who practice humanitarian architecture on a global scale must negotiate obstacles such as language barriers, inadequate understanding of local practices, and an overly-heroic sense of hubris. Meanwhile, many of our local communities suffer from less dramatic yet equally dire conditions of decay, poverty, and neglect.

The need to address these local conditions raises a number of questions. Are traditional models of architectural practice still viable in cities mired in physical, psychological, and economic crisis? What are the reasonable limits of architectural involvement in such contexts? Are students being educated in a manner that allows them to maximize the public benefits of their talents?

This paper discusses the philosophical underpinnings and activities of practitioners who are breaking from previously-accepted models of global, professional, and humanitarian practices. It also outlines their influence upon a graduate level design studio offered at a Midwestern university that engages students in a dialogue regarding the social, political, and cultural obligations of the design professional. This pedagogical model explores new interpretations of professional practice, outcomes, and deliverables.

THE NEW MODEL: ACTIVIST DESIGN

Notable humanitarian architecture initiatives have commonly been enacted in response to dramatic, highly-visible man-made or natural disasters. This is to be expected, as the visual impact of such disasters is undeniable: in a matter of moments a village or city can cease to exist not through erosion, but cataclysm, resulting in high numbers of casualties. Sensitive to human suffering, designers respond in the only way they know how: through proposals for design and construction interventions. Architecture for Humanity was founded in 1999 by architect Cameron Sinclair and journalist Kate Stohr as a direct response to the conflict in Kosovo. Architect Shiguru Ban employed and developed his research in cardboard tube construction to aid refugees from natural disasters in Turkey, Rwanda, and his native Japan.

While such situations plaintively call out for intervention, there are numerous communities facing less dramatic afflictions of institutionalized neglect and economic disadvantage. This condition is found all too commonly in many of our major U.S. cities, and can be addressed by practitioners through a model of 'advocacy' or 'activist' design. Aalto University professor Alastair Fuad-Luke defines activist design as "design thinking, imagination, and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change."[1]

Architectural practitioners engaged in this new 'activist' model of practice demonstrate an awareness of, and willingness to embrace, three changes in their approach to their fiduciary responsibilities: a shift in their primary skill set from problem solving to problem seeking, acceptance of an expanded definition of who can be a 'client' (or even clientless praxis), and an expansive view of their talents, and how these talents can positively impact the public.

'Problem Solving' vs. 'Problem Seeking'

Activist architecture requires an entirely new skill set. Whereas architects are typically educated to be 'problem solvers', designers who engage in design activism need to be 'problem seekers'. The critically-trained eye of a designer is well suited to identify situations in need of a solution, but few are trained to actually do so.

In 2002, architect John Peterson, seeking to expand the public impact of his firm's work, and dismayed by the inequities and ineffectuality of open design competitions, created 'a competition of one'. Peterson and his team undertook a study of the open space needs in the South of Market area in San Francisco ('SoMa'), and proposed a plan which would provide generous sidewalks, reimaged vehicular traffic, and a variety of public amenities. The plan resulted in a great deal of public dialogue, and support from the San Francisco Planning Department, Redevelopment Agency, and Transportation Authority.

Furthermore, the project became the springboard for Peterson to initiate his companion practice: Public Architecture. Peterson has been especially adept at encouraging synergies between his for-profit and non-profit ventures, sharing resources and space, and allowing the profits drawn from one entity to subsidize the pro bono

work done by the other. In 2005 Public Architecture, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, launched 'The 1%', a program that links designers eager to provide pro bono services with organizations and communities in need.

While the networking between need and service provider offered by a program such as 'The 1%' is a major step towards widespread practice of activist design, the SoMa project is also notable for its 'self-initiated' nature. When Peterson began his investigations, there was no directly identified client driving the project. As Georgeen Theodore, principal of Interboro Partners states: "Advocacy shouldn't always be about helping an existing constituency obtain its stated goals, but about producing or assembling a public out of the infinity of practices that exist in the city."[2]

Expanded Definition of 'Client' or Clientless Praxis

Traditional architectural practice has defined its client base in a surprisingly narrow way. In times of economic prosperity, firms undertake projects initiated by corporations, institutions, and individuals with the economic means and borrowing power to engage in built work. An oft-quoted, yet contested, statistic states that architects actually impact only two to five percent of all work that does get built. This indicates that there exists a large number of nontraditional 'clients' whom architectural practitioners have not nurtured, either for the clients benefit, or for the firm's continued prosperity.

A notable (and controversial) precedent of an architect who has embraced unorthodox means of expanding the public awareness of architects (and his client base) is John Morefield. After having been laid off from firms twice within the same year, Morefield set up a booth in Seattle's Pike Place Market, and offered architectural advice to passers-by for the fee of five cents. By making himself accessible to the public, Morefield has built a successful, albeit small, solo practice:

> "Everyone asks: 'Well, this is great and all, but are you getting work?' Yeah, I am. My plate's almost full. …Those people had found me through the local media and they told me, 'We wanted an architect, but we didn't know where to look.' But they read about me, found me online, and gave me a call." [3]

In addition to Morefield, there is a growing number of 'storefront architecture firms' which encourage walk-in clients, as well as firms involved in proactive research and engagement efforts. Through such approaches, architects can break out of restrictive definitions of 'client', and promote awareness of the benefits design professionals bring to the public at large. M. Scott Ball, co-executive director of the Community Housing Resource Center, likewise sees the benefits of such efforts in promoting the profession:

> "Communities solicit architects in two ways: specific requests are obvious, but unmet needs also ask to be addressed. The two forms of invitations act as catalysts for each other. Recognizing and addressing unmet needs can precipitate specific requests from a community, as its residents get to know us and understand the value of our skills.

> Proactive efforts at improving communities can thus seed the ground for professional expansion." [4]

Precedents for activist architecture often have grown out of 'guerrilla design' activities. One such example is the work of Mad Housers, founded by Georgia Tech graduate students Michael Connor and Brian Finkle in 1987. In an attempt to address the issue of homelessness in Atlanta, the strategy of the Mad Housers was to construct make-shift shelters, and deliver them by night to underutilized properties, where they were 'claimed' by members of the homeless populace. While the Mad Housers did not (at first, anyway) work directly with actual clients, they did recognize the needs of a specific group of users.

Today, the Mad Housers are a registered nonprofit organization, which builds 'huts' for specific clients, many of whom participate in construction. This transition from 'guerilla activists' to 'legitimate' service providers underscores the opportunities for architects to fulfill their fiduciary responsibility within a matrix of social and professional sanction.

Expansive View of Talents and Increased Public Benefits

Architects, once the designers of everything, are viewed by some to have retreated to a place of specialization that borders upon marginalization. Activist designers recognize the broader range of their talents, and are more comfortable than traditional practitioners in applying their design abilities to different types of projects, often moving outside the traditional definitions of 'architecture'.

When the interdisciplinary firm Interboro was contacted by the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) to advocate on their behalf against a proposed waterfront plan in Bayonne, New Jersey, the client's assumption was that Interboro's response would be a plan suggesting a counter-proposal. Instead, the firm's response focused upon public education regarding the proposed plan. The end result was an illustrated broadsheet that could be used by the ILA to present their concerns to the community.

Interboro had given their client something more useful than a competing vision for the Bayonne waterfront (which could have been easily dismissed): they used their ability as designers to gather, analyze, synthesize, and present pertinent information in a manner that allowed the ILA to better execute their mission. "So, in terms of both product (we developed a publication rather than a plan) and a process (we are bypassing the city's planning agency)," writes Georgeen Theodore, "we have adapted and changed what the advocacy planner traditionally does."[5]

STUDIO PHILOSOPHY

In many of the previous precedents the designers did not wait to be approached by a potential client: they undertook a design endeavor which they felt was worthwhile and addressed a need, even if they

did so without a specific, defined constituency. In these examples a common thread is present. Activist practitioners provide a roadmap of practice as "campaign," rather than as an isolated, object-based, endeavor. How will the next generation of designers be educated in the activist model of practice?

The Activist Architecture and Design Studio was founded in the fall of 2007 to be part of the Master of Architecture program at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield, Michigan. In this studio, special focus is placed upon cultivating student abilities in critically reading their environment from both the physical and social perspective, as well as upon expanding the students' definitions of 'architectural' interventions. Students are challenged to propose design solutions to enact change within their local contexts.

While many community design studio activities are typically initiated by (or in partnership with) established clients who seek assistance in addressing their needs, the student-initiated projects in this studio are intended to provide a 'view of the possible' to constituencies which may not be formally organized.

STUDIO FRAMEWORK

Identify Problem

Students are first charged with identifying unsatisfactory conditions in their surrounding environment. Armed with a camera (and a critical eye) students are required to document, and even 'propagandize', the problems they observe in their community. They must then identify and fully define a constituency who is or might be impacted by one or more of their identified problems, and who would benefit from the mitigation of the problem. Lastly, students are to identify the larger social, environmental, and economic ecosystem within which the identified problem exists.

This step is crucially important to the success of the studio endeavor, and reflects a break from the comfort zone occupied by most students. A similar approach is documented by Design Corps founder Bryan Bell:

> "Another approach to finding a client is to undertake research into a specific community or issue, which can reveal social problems in need of a built solution. …The students decided to do something that had never been done before: knock on the door of every household in Mason's Bend, beginning a discussion with the community of 23 houses and 112 people."[6]

Find Community Partners

Students are next required to find one person, organization, or business in the area affected by the problem they have identified. This must be someone the student thinks is creating positive change. They are asked to discuss the work of this 'change agent' as it potentially impacts problems they identified. Typically, students recognize quickly that a comprehensive report on the work of such agents re-

Figure 1. Example of student 'problem identification'.
Image credit: Robert Davis

quires a virtual or face-to-face interview. It is at this point that a critical moment in their semester takes place: the formation of an alliance within the effected community.

The involvement of this agent in the student's design process is indispensable. Architect Edith Cherry notes that "a client group does not have to be from a foreign country to have cultural values unlike your own. In many ways, neighborhoods in the same town have different cultures."[7]

Furthermore, communities (particularly those who have been marginalized based upon race or economic class) often are understand-

Figure 2. Student Thomas Newman and local agent Vanessa Peake of the Detroit Community Development Corporation
Image credit: Edward Orlowski

ably distrustful of an 'outsider' who makes offers of assistance. The agent becomes a trusted mediator and (as Cherry terms them) an 'informant' for the student, facilitating entrée into the affected constituency.

The opportunity to work collaboratively with constituents is an essential but infrequent part of the architecture student experience. In addition to receiving valuable input, which will impact the direction and success of their design proposal, the students gain experience in conducting themselves in a manner fitting a compassionate design professional, including humility, cooperation, and respect.

There is, however, a major challenge facing students when working with local agents, and that is finding the best way to frame the working relationship. Students who see the agents as 'informants,' who provide access to situated knowledge, tend to work more comfortably than those who view the agent as a traditional 'client'.

In the latter case, students must overcome the temptation to simply 'draw what the agents want'; in which case they fail to bring any real outside expertise to the community. It is therefore important for the student to ask: 'What do I as a *designer* bring to this problem?' Peterson summarizes the manner in which a designer can view themselves as a community partner:

"As we are bringing an investment of in-kind service, we should, within reason, expect to have more influence over the selection and development of a pro bono project. Just as financial donors select and work with non-profits to identify the best use of their money, architects can similarly guide the focus and use of their gift." [8]

By engaging nontraditional clients in the design studio, participating students are given insight into avenues that can become models for an alternative view of work opportunities as they enter their professional careers. In many cases, these relationships extend beyond the scope of the semester, with students continuing their engagement with the local agents and the communities.

Propose Positive Change

Once a problem has been identified, and community partnerships formed, the students develop design solutions aimed at mitigating the conditions from which the stated problem has sprung. The fact that each student tackles a different self-identified project leads to some distinct differences between this and the traditional studio model, where all students are investigating the same site, program, and issues. As the problems the students identify can vary greatly, resulting studio projects range in scale and complexity from street-vending carts to small-scale urban plans. A small tactical intervention presents the opportunities for – and expectation of – a higher level of detail, often resulting in a built object or prototype. By contrast, larger, more strategic projects require a broader vision, and the ability to propose phased implementation.

LESSONS LEARNED

During the five years the studio has been active, there has been a tremendous growth curve for both the students and the instructor. There have been a few distinct lessons drawn from the student projects and processes that are passed from one class to the next (in part because former students are often eager to return as jurors). A few of the most important of these lessons are outlined below.

Separate Problems from Symptoms

The process at the heart of this studio is one that is predicated on a model of discovery. Typically, the more successful investigations are those undertaken by students willing to peel away layers of information, rather than reacting to initial perceptions. In many cases, what students initially identify as 'problems' prove instead to be symptoms of larger systemic dysfunction, and it is only through diligent research that the true 'problem' is identified, and addressed.

Figure 3. Neighborhood bus stop park by Shane Hernandez
Image credit: Shane Hernandez

Such was the experience of student Shane Hernandez, whose investigations were initiated by the observation that instead of using available parklands, children in his Port Huron, Michigan, neighborhood were playing in the street. Shane's investigations and interactions with neighbors and city officials revealed that people had figuratively and literally been fenced off from each other and as a result, the community became very disconnected. In response, Shane proposed a multi-layered plan that allowed multiple levels of human interaction and layers of activity throughout the neighborhood. In this case, a simple observation led to a greater awareness of needs at the scale of city, neighborhood, and block.

Think Small for Big Change

Students often find themselves attempting to address incredibly large and complex problems such as poverty, pollution, and homelessness: issues that have vexed governments and multinational organizations alike. It is folly to believe that a studio project can eradicate such daunting problems. In such situations, it becomes necessary for the student designer to 'find a pressure point', where a focused effort can yield potential benefits.

The result is often a scalable solution that can be adapted and applied to address the components of a larger problem at a reasonable level. Participatory planner Nabeel Hamdi has long recognized the value of a 'bubble up' approach to initiating change within a community. An ideal advocated by Hamdi is to start where you can and look for multipliers. This was the approach taken by student Dolly Patel.

Dolly identified the issue of overflowing trash in public space as a major problem in her hometown of Anand in India. Instead of attempting to address the issue at a large scale, Dolly looked for an opportunity to create a scalable biodigestion process that could be sized to work in a small section of the community, and could be repeated as needed. She identified a cycle involving local farmers, their livestock, city residents, and regional fuel providers. Influenced by Exploration Architecture director Michael Pawlyn's discussion of such cycles, she proposed a way of redefining the existing relationships in a mutually beneficial way.

Help who you Really **Can**

In other cases in which students face a problem of great magnitude, they discover that by refocusing upon a sub-constituency of a problem, they are able to make a meaningful contribution. This is illustrated by the work of Justin Shafer, whose investigation into the issue of homelessness led him to the South Oakland Shelter (SOS), an organization that seeks to help the homeless.

Through the course of his investigations, Justin realized that it was SOS that actually needed his help. He recognized that he could make a larger impact on the situation not by attempting to directly intervene on behalf of the homeless, but by offering support to an organization with the means and experience to tackle their issues directly.

Justin's resulting project was designed to aid SOS with its outreach and volunteer recruiting efforts. He proposed a 'kit of parts', which can be used to create signage, interview space, shower facilities, or anything that can help the group carry out its mission. The project did not necessarily render one single architectural solution, but focused instead on providing the necessary means to carry out *any* architectural solution. In addition, rather than proposing a closed narrative, where the architect's vision becomes the sole arbiter of the

project's usefulness, Justin instead placed the toolkit in the hands of the user, trusting their collective intelligence to make the end result even more effective.
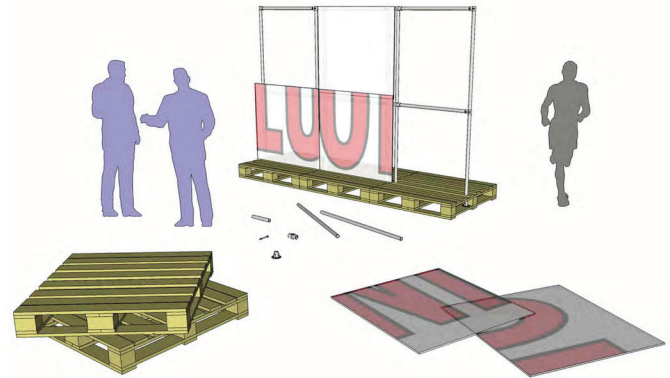

Figure 4. SOS outreach 'kit of parts' by Justin Shafer
Image credit: Justin Shafer

A Building is not Always the Answer

In this studio, a number of students find themselves challenging preconceived notions of what is 'architecture' through their selected projects. After spending four or five years participating in studios where the end result was always a building (existing on paper only) some of the students found themselves explaining to friends, peers, and even parents how a cart, a public-awareness campaign, or a renovated school bus was indeed an appropriate design response from a graduate architecture student. Ball discusses the practical benefits of such expansive thinking:

> "We focus on edifice, but architecture itself is whatever percolates out of our activity as trained architects. Invitations are everywhere for us to step back out into a broad section of society, if we show a willingness to reinvent ourselves and allow the profession to percolate once again." [9]

When student Stuart Johnson noticed a man fishing off of a bridge, dangerously close to traffic, he had no idea the direction his resulting project would take. Stuart's solution was to create The Mobile Fishing Station: a safe and easily deployable system that can provide a fishing location on any waterway. Mobility and convenience were crucial, as the fishing station may need to be deployed on private property, then camouflaged or removed within minutes.

This project marked a significant departure for Stuart. The son of a practicing architect, Stuart found himself needing to explain to his father, and others, that what he was doing was indeed architecture, and meaningful architecture at that. Activist designers must be able to recognize that the best answer to a situation is not always a building, and be able to lead others through alternative processes.

them. The most successful projects in this studio have been fueled by tremendous personal passion for the issues addressed, and the communities encountered.

Students in this studio develop an awareness of the role architects and designers can play in the advancement of the public good. They develop an understanding of how their specific talents can be brought to bear upon issues of environmental, planning, and public policy. For some, this opportunity may inspire them to serve on community boards and in non-architectural organizations: options they may have previously considered to be outside the traditional engagement of the architect. Most importantly, the students are prepared to bring design aid to their own back yards.

For more information about the Activist Architecture Studio, and expanded case studies, visit: http://activistarchltu.wordpress.com/

ENDNOTES

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2. Georgeen Theodore. "Advocacy? Three Modes of Operation for the Activist Architect.", Field: Volume 3, Issue 1: 'Agency and the Praxis of Activism' (2009), 63, http://www.field-journal.org/uploads/file/2009%20Volume%203/field_2009_Volume_3_web.pdf.
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4. M. Scott Ball, "Expanding the Role of the Architect," in *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service through Architecture*, ed. Bryan Bell (New York: Princeton Architectural Press , 2004), 135.
5. Theodore, 61.
6. Bryan Bell, "Finding Clients," in *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service through Architecture*, ed. Bryan Bell (New York: Princeton Architectural Press , 2004), 26.
7. Edith Cherry. *Programming for Design: From Theory to Practice*. (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1999), 7.
8. John Peterson, Preface to *The Power of Pro Bono: 40 Stories about Design for the Public Good by Architects and Their Clients, ed. John Cary* (New York: Metropolis / Bellerophon, 2010), xii.
9. Ball, 135.
10. Andrew Powell. "Educational Possibilities of Humanitarian Architecture" in *Field*: Volume 3, Issue 1: 'Agency and the Praxis of Activism'. (2009), 120, http://www.field-journal.org/uploads/file/2009%20Volume%203/field_03_9_Educational_Possibilities_of_Humanitarian_Architecture.pdf

Figure 5. Student Stuart Johnson and the Mobile Fishing Station. Image credit: Stuart Johnson

CONCLUSION

Students who embrace the process of the Activist Architecture and Design Studio enjoy a transformative experience that offers a contrast to traditional studio paradigms, as well as a platform to redefine the manner in which they participate in professional practice. They are offered the opportunity to bring their talents 'to the people', acting as ambassadors of the profession among those who might otherwise be excluded from participation in the shaping of their environment. Architect Andrew Powell summarizes the benefits for students participating in such a model, including:

> "an increased awareness of varied design approaches, hands-on making, improved social and communication skills, an idea about reflective practice, awareness of the impact of global issues, a greater understanding of the physical and social context of design, exposure to multi-disciplinary models, as well as generally feeling far better equipped to deal with concerns about architectural sustainability in tough situations." [10]

Activist architecture prohibits neutrality, as the designer must embrace societal needs and advocate for change. The students can no longer operate in a mode of intellectual detachment from the work they are producing, as they can now put names and faces to individuals they are attempting to assist. Even though they are developing ideas collaboratively, the work suddenly becomes more personal to