BOTTOM-UP SOCIAL CHANGE: MATERIALS | BUILDINGS | COMMUNITY

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"We are currently witnessing the largest wave of urban growth in human history. The nature and scope of this shift varies across the globe, but economic development and consumption are altering the quality of life for city dwellers and rural communities, bringing disproportionate prosperity to some, while increasing inequality for many."
—Bottom-up Social Change, Call for Abstracts

The intent of the 2019 Intersections Symposium was to explore the strengths and weaknesses of bottom-up social drivers as catalysts for development, growth, and transformation of the built environment, and to understand the ways in which these interventions can be more equitable, inclusive, affordable, and sustainable. What we learned from the symposium participants is that architects, educators, and students can and should play a significant role in catalyzing change within their communities, however, they must remain cognizant of their often privileged position when responding to collective needs, as the concepts of 'bottom-up' or 'top-down' can shift based on one's own ideological or socio-economic vantage point.

As cities expand and densify, urban systems are more relevant than ever before, and these networks will determine how effectively resources are utilized in the future. Urban infrastructure projects are often vast, expensive, centrally planned endeavors; however, this typical top-down frame of reference is challenged by a number of projects included in this publication. Small-scale, locally driven solutions can be more effective and responsive to rapidly changing demands shaped by climate change and urban development, and as municipal governments and others recognize and support the power of these types of interventions, the boundaries between the top and bottom are blurred. Courtney Crosson describes this shift in her essay "The Ensuing Flood," where she argues for a decentralized network of flood mitigation in Tucson, Arizona informed by contributions from community stakeholders, city and county staff, and architecture students. Students (or "citizen architects") act to bridge between neighborhood groups and the city by providing design services the municipality cannot cover due to budgeting and staffing constraints. This example, and others like it in the following chapters, equips us with a replicable model for identifying social investment opportunities that can contribute to healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities.

Many cities are contending with displacement caused by urban development. Supporting community conversations around change and providing a platform for mobilization and involvement is oftentimes as or more important than simply constructing physical space. The Parisite Skatepark, a project led by the Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design at Tulane University, is one such example that "builds power" by supporting existing capacity within the neighborhood where it is located. The Small Center assisted local skaters in advocating for and planning the Peach Orchard, a guerrilla skate park. Thanks to these efforts, the grassroots public space is now New Orleans' first official skate park, run by Transitional Spaces, a skater-organized nonprofit organization. The Small Center, and the other community design centers represented in this publication—the Center for Public Design at Portland State and the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at the University of Detroit Mercy—demonstrate the potential for organizing and empowering individuals to take action within their communities.

Finally, a number of our authors have put forward innovative strategies for bridging competing constraints and interests when contending with the complexities of urban development at both ends of the social policy spectrum. This is perhaps best exemplified in the piece, "Dencity: Innovation in Practice," where Angie Brooks describes how her firm, Brooks + Scarpa Architects, finds design opportunities in negotiating public policy and politics, developer interests, and community needs. Her observations point to a professional model that responds to the public interest much more nimbly and flexibly than laws and codes, and advocates for architects to take on a larger role in crafting policy decisions that allow for growth and affordability without compromising design quality.

Reflecting upon the symposium submissions, we are well aware of who is missing from our conversation. Without those voices, we cannot truly represent or speak for urban or rural communities of color or economically disadvantaged individuals; the very people who are the most vulnerable to the challenges we describe in the symposium call. We acknowledge this shortcoming and preface the work by noting that there are blind spots. However, we must begin somewhere, and be prepared, as architects and educators, to participate in difficult conversations about the "right way" to engage communities and the issues affecting them. It means asking critical questions and showing a willingness to be uncomfortable when working in an environment full of ambiguities—the "messy reality" Rick Mohler describes in the concluding piece for this publication.

Figure 1. Courtney Crosson makes a point, joined by Sergio Palladino (left) and moderator Bryan Bell (right) in their session on Community Connections. Photo: Timothy Niou / Portland Design Pup.