

Design-Build as Social Design Instigation

Public Interest Design (formerly known as Community Design) pedagogy in schools continues to expand exponentially in both courses and school affiliated design centers.¹ The work of these faculty and students is not simply proposals of potential projects for deserving communities or design work that is later built by a contractor.

An increasing portion of this work is being built by students as small-scale Design-Build projects as an incipient instigation to impact the social landscape within a community. These initial projects can stimulate larger projects and are a key component to building trust and relationships within communities.

These types of Public Interest Design Design-Build projects seek to address social justice and equity within the community and city and create positive social change or *social design instigation*. This is created by becoming a partner within a community and addressing shared goals and objectives of the community and partner organization. The designers' (faculty and students) goals are met by achieving the shared goals of the community and partner organization. In doing so, community-focused partnerships (designers, community members, and organizations) are developed to meet the needs of the community.

One area of growing concern among those living in impoverished inner-city neighborhoods is access to fresh food and produce. In these neighborhoods, food deserts are prevalent and access to fresh foods is not available.² A solution to this problem is building community-based fresh food amenities through designing/building community gardens, growing facilities, and small footprint groceries/fresh eateries through community partnerships.

The following projects demonstrate a commitment to providing fresh food offerings in affected neighborhoods and accommodate their functions at different scopes, scales, and timelines within the Design-Build parameters. The methods and participatory process in which the designing and building are completed are varied and provide an opportunity for critical discourse and lessons for others to learn from when establishing these amenities in their communities. The social design instigation created by each of these projects is also important to consider prior to planning projects.

Many community Design-Build projects attempt to do too much and can't be

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completed within their allotted scope and timeline. In *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, Steve Badanes states that some of the major pitfalls of community-service Design-Build programs are: selecting projects that are too large and thus cost more and take longer than expected; using a “competition” approach to decide what to build; and choosing projects requiring students to relocate great distances (the “ambulance chaser” approach). He states that some programs do this well, but it is much more efficient to work closer to home, where you can be more productive, save energy, and build community credibility with each new project in the same geographic area.³ These projects are following Badanes’ advice, by attempting to build community capacity by: working in the same area, designing as a collective team, and leveraging partnerships to make an impact within the neighborhood and/or city over time.



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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA – COMMUNITY DESIGN PRACTICES – KWANZAA COMMUNITY GARDEN

The University of Minnesota School of Architecture’s Bachelor of Design degree program is composed of five practice tracks which students can choose (Spatial/Conceptual, Digital, Material, Global Design, and Community Design). The Design-Build courses within the Community Design Practices (CDP) works within neighborhoods in Minneapolis, a short drive from campus. The work within the communities is designed to teach students how to implement Public Interest Design through Design-Build projects. The projects start during spring semester through two workshops (first: an introduction to community and civic engagement through design; second: development of projects from the first half workshop on a more defined scale). The May term (three weeks long) involves the building phase of the previous semester work.⁴ Approximately 18-24 students are enrolled during spring semester and 14-16 (same students) during the May Term build phase. One faculty member coordinates the work during the spring and May terms.

The Kwanzaa Community Garden project is located in the north Minneapolis neighborhood of Hawthorne. This neighborhood was devastated by a tornado in May of 2011, and suffers with a chronic level of poverty. 35 percent of the families in the Hawthorne neighborhood are below the poverty level. This is 24 percent more than the poverty level for the entire city of Minneapolis.⁵

The community garden project began through previous relationships with the local Master Gardeners group and the Kwanzaa Community Center. An open lot was available and the Hawthorne Neighborhood Council applied for a Community Block

Figure 1: Kwanzaa Community Garden

Grant. Additional funding was secured through Accenture with the university applying a match with tools and labor. The project design phase started during spring 2012. The student groups met with the client approximately once per week during the spring semester to coordinate the design, detailing, and materials for the garden and storage facility before the rapid three week build session during May Term. The garden design was completed with 28 beds, seven of which were designated as youth gardens. The following spring, the Kwanzaa Community Center inquired to have CDP design more amenities to the garden. The students in 2013 designed and built a rainwater catchment system for the garden. The continued success of the project and community amenity was further enhanced by an artist affiliated with the



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community center which painted a mural on the storage facility in 2013.

TULANE UNIVERSITY – TULANE CITY CENTER – HOLLYGROVE GROWERS PAVILION

Tulane City Center (TCC), a design center of Tulane University is located within the Central City neighborhood in New Orleans. TCC was established in 2005 immediately following Hurricane Katrina to first help coordinate work of other Schools of Architecture within the city, and then later work on their own projects. The TCC coordinates a wide range of services including: architecture, planning, graphic-advocacy, capacity-building, and Design-Build. As stated on their website, “We work with community groups throughout New Orleans to solve difficult problems with good design.”⁶ TCC does not propose projects for communities, but responds directly to RFPs from non-profit organizations. This ensures that the work being done is truly needed and desired by the respective organization and community. TCC only works in the New Orleans area.

The Hollygrove Growers Pavilion began through development of a master plan for the Hollygrove Market & Farm (HM&F). Prior to Hurricane Katrina, fresh food was not accessible in the Carrollton-Hollygrove neighborhood. The aftermath of the storm exacerbated the need to establish urban farming in the neighborhood to make fresh produce available for the residents. During the 2007-08 school year,

Figure 2: Hollygrove Growers Pavilion

12 students worked with the Carrollton-Hollygrove Community Development Corporation (CHCDC) to develop a visioning document which became the master plan for the one acre farm on a former nursery site. The first two phases (completed by professionals) involved renovating the existing onsite two-story building to become the grower's market and education/office spaces. The third phase involved building the pavilion and establishing all the planting beds. Eight students worked with two faculty members (one affiliated with TCC, and one with the School of Architecture) to complete the project. The pavilion was funded through a \$12,000 grant by Aveeno (beauty products) in an effort to fund beautification projects in the city after the storm. The pavilion was completed in 2008. The pavilion provides a shaded space for instruction, rainwater capture for demonstration gardens, and incorporates recycled-content building materials.⁷

The success of these first three phases continues in the neighborhood. The market sells individual produce and \$25 pre-boxed Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Hollygrove neighborhood residents can purchase boxes with a 20% discount. Plans are underway to begin an expansion of the farm to an adjacent property adding one additional acre.



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MIAMI UNIVERSITY – OVER-THE-RHINE DESIGN-BUILD STUDIO – 1400 REPUBLIC

Miami University started work in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood in Cincinnati in 1996. Over-the-Rhine is a historic neighborhood listed on the National Register of Historic Places comprised of Italianate buildings from 1860-1910. The university is located 40 miles away in Oxford, Ohio and students live within the neighborhood during their semester working on the project as part of the Residency Program

Figure 3: 1400 Republic Corner Entry

established in 2006. Students take a full load of courses at the Center for Community Engagement in the neighborhood and work on their Design-Build project which serves to revitalize the remaining housing stock. This enables students to become members of the neighborhood and establish a true social connection with residents. In addition to the Design-Build work, students also provide schematic design proposals for Affordable Housing Tax Credit Financing and community design work for organizations in the neighborhood. Through all these forms of engagement the intent is always to impact the learning of students and community alike – mutual reciprocity.⁸

The 1400 Republic project began during January 2012 and is the renovation of a first floor corner building into a grocery/sandwich shop. The Design-Build studio which partnered with Over-the-Rhine Community Housing on previous projects, received a call that another property was available for renovation. The studio began the process of cleaning the building in the fall of 2012 and uncovered 300-400 signs from the People's Movement (during the 1970s through 1990s) to preserve affordable housing in the neighborhood. After cleaning the building, the first floor had to be removed due to moisture and termite damage. In addition, the foundation and masonry walls needed to be stabilized. In the fall of 2013 design on the grocery/sandwich shop began. The grocery will occupy 300 of the 700 square feet of the space, with the sandwich shop and seating using the remaining space. The students plan to complete the space and open in the fall of 2014. The project was financed with \$15,000 from Over-the-Rhine Community Housing and a \$15,000 match from the university (including workshop space, facilities, and materials). The work of the Design-Build studio is coordinated by one faculty member and there are 5-10 students per semester (with new students each semester).

SOCIAL IMPACTS WITHIN THE NEIGHBORHOODS

These projects in very different neighborhoods in Minneapolis, New Orleans, and Cincinnati demonstrate the community building capacity created by the desire for accessible fresh food. Each neighborhood met these needs in different ways, but collectively realized the positive social benefits for the community prior to engaging with the design team.

The Kwanzaa Community Garden project has benefitted all the families engaged in the gardening process in addition to beautifying the neighborhood following the 2011 tornado. Today, the 28 beds are fully utilized and Master Gardeners help teach adults and youth how to garden. What began as a “feel good” story has now established roots in the neighborhood and will return many times over with the produce shared throughout the community.

The Hollygrove Growers Pavilion was the initial start to further expansion of the Hollygrove Market & Farm. HM&F is open on Saturdays (10:00am-2:00pm) and Tuesdays (Noon-6:00pm). A 2013 study found that less than 4% of customers live in the Hollygrove neighborhood.⁹ Many of the local residents complained that the \$25 CSA boxes (including the 20% discount) were too expensive and would drive to a grocery store to save money. In addition, residents complained that some of produce (in the CSA boxes) they didn't know how to use or prepare. The HM&F staff understands these challenges and the financial reality to continue to run the market and farm. They are trying to serve the neighborhood members and meet their needs. It is a dialogue that must continue to find the appropriate balance.

1400 Republic is moving toward substantial completion and opening in the fall of 2014. With few lunch and light dinner options in the neighborhood, the grocery/sandwich shop should become a gathering place and source of community pride.

With all the housing in the neighborhood, the grocery/sandwich shop shouldn't have any problem drawing customers with so many within walking distance. The only concern is the unknown price of the food and resident reaction. Although the three year timeline is a long time to wait for the opening, the almost 20 years of consistent work in the neighborhood only reinforces the relationships established.

INSIGHTS

Even though these are Design-Build projects, there is less focus on the "design" of these projects and more on the community "building." These projects, at a scope and scale able to be realized by a collective group of students, are the start of social instigation and will most likely result in larger projects by professionals and investors in the community. These Design-Build projects provided the impetus to get the work started, organize the community, and help them move forward with additional projects.

These projects demonstrate the impact that access to fresh food can make on a community. As these projects continue to completion and/or continue their livelihood in the neighborhood, it is important to do a post occupancy evaluation with the impacted neighborhood residents. Best practices of what is working and what needs to change for future projects needs to be shared so other neighborhoods in the city and beyond can benefit.

It is important to note that these projects were not intrusive, designer-led investigations/interventions into the neighborhoods. Community members and organizations shared their ideas (through RFPs or previous relationships with the faculty members), and the design team *reacted* to the initial inquiry through participatory design techniques. *Proactive* techniques will not work within neighborhoods to achieve social design instigation. The lack of trust will result in ignoring and undermining the designers, and ultimately a stalemate. Both the community members and designers must meet in the middle and create a common vision together to move forward.

Designers should not shy away from the deep social issues that affect impoverished neighborhoods and use participatory Public Interest Design Design-Build to improve lives collectively. These three projects show that social design instigation improves communities, as long as the neighborhoods buy-in and contribute to the ideas and design process. As Nadia Anderson states in *Public Interest Design as Praxis*, "Public Interest Design not only produces spaces that are inclusive, and place based but also creates a theoretical framework that incorporates values of equity, inclusivity, and social justice through action or process... for Public Interest Design, the social production of space is a theoretical framework that points to methods of practice that move beyond rational problem solving to include the habits and practices of ordinary people as well as the systems that give their lives meaning and identity."¹⁰ People and place matter. As long as designers work *with* communities, the benefits for both parties will far outweigh what they can accomplish individually. Positively impacting impoverished communities through social design instigation is possible if designers first solicit ideas, build relationships, and *earn* an invitation into the community prior to entering and working with neighborhood residents.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sharon Haar's map "Community Design Centers and Community Based Architecture Organizations in the US," accessed September 23, 2014, <http://www.communitydesign.org/admin/>.
- 2 USDA definition of food deserts, accessed September 27, 2014, <https://apps.ams.usda.gov/fooddeserts/foodDeserts.aspx>.
- 3 Steve Badanes, "Building Consensus in Design-Build Studios" in *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, edited by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008), 249.
- 4 Public Interest Design: Community-Based Projects ARCH 3250 course description, accessed September 29, 2014, <http://arch.design.umn.edu/studentwork/course/3250/public-interest.html>.
- 5 City of Minneapolis poverty statistics, accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/neighborhoods/hawthorne/neighborhoods_hawthorne_poverty.
- 6 Tulane City Center home page, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://www.tulanecitycenter.org/>.
- 7 Description of Hollygrove Growers Pavilion, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.tulanecitycenter.org/growers-pavilion>.
- 8 Over-the-Rhine Design-Build Studio description, accessed September 30, 2014, <http://arts.muohio.edu/otr/about.html>
- 9 Yuki Kato, "Not Just the Price of Food: Challenges of an Urban Agriculture Organization in Engaging Local Residents," *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. xx, No. x, 2013, 9-14.
- 10 Nadia M. Anderson, "Public Interest Design as Praxis," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 68, Iss. 1, March 2014, 16-17.