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Design in the Public Interest - The Dilemma of Professionalism

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Design in the Public Interest –The Dilemma of Professionalism

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Introduction

Imagining America's 2008 Curriculum Project comprehensively documents the current state of engaged scholarship in the arts and proposes guidelines that embody the key values and principles derived from the breadth of the study. While design can be broadly considered to fall under the mantle of the arts, key distinctions make community-engaged design practice unique, and in some ways problematic. Based on reviews of the literature, professional codes, and contemporary practices, this essay addresses similar themes to the Curriculum Project but in design, focusing on traditions of professional organization and oversight that both raise expectations for civic responsibility and simultaneously present roadblocks to deeper engagement.

Part One is an overview of concepts of professionalism in design, taking the field of architecture as a case study of the complexities encountered across design disciplines. It concludes with an overview of emerging trends in academic and professional practice, such as non-profit community design advocacy projects like Design Corps, and numerous practices engaged in what the Cooper-Hewitt Museum calls "Design for the Other 90 Percent." Part Two focuses on the design process itself, arguing for approaches that favor *Design Engagement* rather than *Design Assistance* and offering principles that can foster community collaborative design practice, specifically: acknowledging mutual value and values; re-defining problems and opportunities; mutually defining risk, success, and failure; creating and renewing structures for communication; and getting serious about feedback, evaluation, and reflection.

PART I. Professionalism in Design and its Problematic Relationship with the 'Public Good'

While the act of practicing one's craft publicly unites design with the other arts, the practice of offering visionary or problem-solving 'services' to the public makes design distinct from the other arts or humanities. An artist, writer, or filmmaker may choose to produce work of a very personal nature in the hope that the public might find ideas that resonate. Or they may choose to work in a very public manner, collaborating with others in order to express ideas important to the community. In either case, this decision remains the choice of the individual artist, and is generally not subject to professional oversight whether in their educational or working contexts.

Design, however, occupies an odd middle ground: as a service to individuals or groups of clients, societies generally expect that what is produced will also accord with some sense of the 'public good,' or at a minimum, do no harm. But because design is usually offered as a 'service' provided by one individual or group to another, paradoxically, the notion of collaboration or public service 'for its own sake' often becomes problematic. What is the difference between performing duties for which a designer normally expects to be compensated and work for the 'public good' that has intrinsic value and perhaps ought to be performed whether compensation is forthcoming or not? What happens when the desires of a client and those of the community do not align? Who does the designer serve? While these questions reveal the moral complexity underlying almost all professions, this essay will focus specifically on the implications of advocating for the public good in the practice of design and in design education.

The term design includes a wide range of distinct practices, from the intimate scale of garden or interior design to the re-shaping of large urban areas and environmental landscapes. While architecture is neither the only nor the most noteworthy of the design professions, it *is* perhaps the one with the longest record of professional organization and educational oversight.

For this reason I will use architecture as a focus in order to problematize and explore the issues of the 'public interest' in higher education for design, especially as it is manifested in the professional schools.

While the general public might think of architects as being at least somewhat socially progressive as a profession, the reality is uncertain. Historically, even this vague impression has been seriously in doubt. When Whitney Young, Jr., outspoken civil rights activist and head of the Urban League from 1961 to 1971, addressed the 1968 American Institute of Architects' national conference in Portland, Oregon, he called out the entire profession of architecture for its lack of social engagement. In an oft-quoted passage, he challenged them to become a more positive force for social change, saying, "You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance."[i] Responding to Young's provocation, the profession has begun to re-focus on its commitments to community and society, most notably through certain aspects of architectural education (to be addressed later in this document). But the current situation in architectural practice seems to be only marginally better now more than forty years later. Why is this the case? And what more can be done in design education in order to insure that another generation does not pass with as little forward progress in designers' commitment to social relevance?

Some answers might be found by looking more closely at our cultural attitudes towards the design professions, and at the concept of 'professionalism' in general. By contrasting professional education with other approaches found in the arts and humanities, perhaps some light can be shed upon a few of the factors inhibiting greater community collaboration and

lessons can be learned that might benefit new approaches to championing social issues in education more broadly.

Professional Requirements and Education

The American Institute of Architects (AIA), the premier national professional organization for the field of architecture, was founded in 1857. Among other functions, it maintains the profession's "Code of Ethics & Professional Conduct," most recently updated in 2007.[ii] Section 2 of the code addresses public service in two ways:

> Ethical Standard 2.2 Public Interest Services:
>
> Members should render public interest professional services, including pro bono services, and encourage their employees to render such services. Pro bono services are those rendered without expecting compensation, including those rendered for indigent persons, after disasters, or in other emergencies.
>
> Ethical Standard 2.3 Civic Responsibility:
>
> Members should be involved in civic activities as citizens and professionals, and should strive to improve public appreciation and understanding of architecture and the functions and responsibilities of architects.

Beyond these two short paragraphs, the thirty-five page Code is silent about the proactive and positive actions architects are expected to take in support of the public good. The remainder of the code focuses on strictures against public harm and the fiduciary responsibilities for services rendered to paying clients.

The Seattle chapter of the AIA, like most big city chapters, features a page on its website devoted to "Community Service," which opens with the exhortation: "You became an architect

because you care about the places you live and work, and believe in the difference great design can make. Put those skills to use on one of these important projects."[iii] It goes on to list only two suggested opportunities: helping the AIA develop New Guidelines for Pro Bono Service, and volunteering for Seattle's Great City Neighborhood Assistance Program. According to the site, "Examples of neighborhood projects include responding to new development proposals, helping neighborhoods who want street improvements, developing strategies for parks, open space or pea patches, strategizing about volunteer organizing." While the Neighborhood Assistance Program offers direct service opportunities, the call to assist the AIA develop guidelines for pro bono services indicates that the organization has still not fully embraced the concept of working for the public good outside of normal fee-for-service client relationships. In fact, under the heading of "Impetus for issuing guidelines for pro bono work," the draft document itself admits to a "lack of current guidelines" and states that: "To date, the AIA has never had guidelines governing its members' activities as they relate to pro bono services. It was not until 2007 that the AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct's Ethical Standard 2.2 was amended to address public service." [iv] This is nearly forty years after being publicly shamed for social and civic irrelevance.

The document that the AIA is developing, "Institute Guidelines to Assist AIA Members, Firms and Components in Undertaking Pro Bono Service Activities," begins with an introduction that describes its purpose:

> The American Institute of Architects encourages all of its members, their firms, and state and local components to engage in providing pro bono services as part of their contributions to the highest aspirations of the architecture profession and the Institute in service to society. Through participation in whatever format they may choose, every member of the AIA can support and further the values of the Institute in terms of its

advocacy for sustainable design and practices, diversity, and elevation of the stature of the

profession of architecture in the eyes of the public.[v]

The last phrase is quite telling, since it appears here that one of the major concerns spurring the

AIA to action is its public image.

The document goes on to describe, at length, the contribution of architectural

education to the profession's on-again, off-again history of civic engagement:

Starting in the 1960s, both university-based and community-based design studios

were formed to respond to the pressing need for professional expertise by many

inner-city neighborhood groups and coalitions for planning and design services.

During this same time, faculty and students in the academy were questioning the

relevancy of the traditional studio model when the "real learning" was taking

place in the streets. By 1980 many schools had unfortunately totally dropped or

reduced this approach to design education. However, the Boyer Report, authored

by Drs. Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang in 1996, included a chapter titled "Service

to the Nation," which revived the concept of service-learning/community outreach

as an integral component of a viable architecture curriculum. In the dozen years

since the report was first issued, the National Architectural Accrediting Board

(NAAB) has developed, refined, and applied various criteria relating to

community-based, service learning in their accrediting process.[vi]

The NAAB sets criteria for assessing architecture degree programs and accrediting them

for the purposes of professional licensure. The exact nature and scope of the criteria that

are dedicated to community-based service learning remains questionable. Their

"Conditions for Accreditation" were most recently updated in 2004, and the majority of

references to the term "service" in this document relate to "contracts of service" or the supply of air, water, and power to buildings (which are collectively referred to as "building services"). "Public service" is mentioned in only one paragraph of its thirteen conditions. This lone reference (included below in its entirety) is in the context of a thirty-one page document that devotes more than three pages to the requirements for a school's library resources:

3.1.5 Architectural Education and Society

The program must demonstrate that it equips students with an informed understanding of social and environmental problems and develops their capacity to address these problems with sound architecture and urban design decisions. In the APR (Architecture Program Report), the accredited degree program may cover such issues as how students gain an understanding of architecture as a social art, including the complex processes carried out by the multiple stakeholders who shape built environments; the emphasis given to generating the knowledge that can mitigate social and environmental problems; how students gain an understanding of the ethical implications of decisions involving the built environment; and how a climate of civic engagement is nurtured, including a commitment to professional and public services.[vii]

Of the thirty-four specific areas of learning that schools are *required* to include in an architectural education, only two address anything close to social justice or community engagement, and these fall under the rubrics of "Human Diversity," defined as *"Understanding of the diverse needs, values, behavioral norms, physical ability, and social and spatial patterns that characterize different cultures and individuals and the implication of this diversity for the*

societal roles and responsibilities of architects,"[viii] and "Accessibility, e.g., "*Ability to* design both site and building to accommodate individuals with varying physical abilities."[ix] While these are admirable concerns, given the technical demands of the other thirty-two areas of required learning, the collective impact of these relatively weak requirements has been that most students will, at best, encounter a design challenge involving low-cost housing and be required to show ramps for disabled access in their drawings.

The proposed amendments to the NAAB's "Conditions for Accreditation" for 2009 were disseminated for comment on March 1st of this year and approved for implementation on July 10, 2009. While they do not significantly alter the areas of learning that are *required* for a professional education, they DO go further toward a more socially engaged and relevant position for the profession by asking programs to "demonstrate through narrative and artifacts, how they respond to…(five important) perspectives on architecture education," the last of which is:

> Architectural Education and the Public Good.
>
> That students enrolled in the accredited degree are prepared: to be active, engaged citizens; to be responsive to the needs of a changing world; to acquire the knowledge needed to mitigate social and environmental problems; to understand the ethical implications of their decisions; to reconcile differences between the architect's obligation to his/her client and the public, and; to nurture a climate of civic engagement, including a commitment to professional and public service and leadership.[x]

While this might not seem like a radical call to arms, it does represent the first time that the NAAB acknowledges that a "commitment to professional and public services" (as stated rather equivocally in the 2004 conditions) might require a "reconciliation of differences" between the

interests of the clients for their professional services and the interests of the public good. And the call to "nurture a climate of civic engagement" is a very promising development in the struggle to break down the barriers of professional isolation and to make professional architectural design truly relevant to society at large. But what is it about the nature of 'professionalism' in general that makes the inclusion of the 'public interest' so problematic, at least as it has been shown here in the case of architecture?

'Professions' as Closed Societies that Schools May be a Means of Opening

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'profession' has several senses that are of interest in understanding its seemingly contradictory nature with regard to public interests. Some highlights of the definitions include:

> I. Senses relating to the declaration of faith, principles, etc.
>
> > 1. a. The declaration, promise, or vow made by a person entering a religious order; (hence) the action of entering such an order; the fact or occasion of being professed in a religious order. *(2 through 6 are similarly of a religious nature)*
>
> II. Senses relating to professional occupation.
>
> > 7. a. An occupation in which a professed knowledge of some subject, field, or science is applied; a vocation or career, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification.
> >
> > b. More widely: any occupation by which a person regularly earns a living.[xi]

Thus, the very terms 'profession' or 'professional' combine a sense of commitment to a set of values that are shared by a unique group, with a sense of this group being somehow exclusive,

whether by virtue of its members' sworn allegiance or the education and training required for entry into that group.

Added to this high-minded exclusivity is the fact such an occupation might be practiced for monetary compensation. This sort of 'monastic order' of 'specialists for hire' seems to embody an internal contradiction. Hermetic practices, separation or distinction from society at large, and commitment to higher principles are not automatically assumed to be synonymous with a simple occupation. In legal terms, the regulation of the architectural profession stems largely from concerns about public safety and legal codes of business regulation. While the state agencies that oversee the licensing of architects are concerned mainly that they 'do no harm,' the profession itself simultaneously exhibits a call to 'higher standards' and a desire to prop up 'the profession' as a respected occupation. While dedicating itself, as a quasi-monastic guild to an abstract notion of the 'public good,' the 'profession' consciously separates itself (through self-valorization) as somehow apart from, and elevated above the society whose best interests it is meant to uphold.

While the architectural profession continues to respond slowly to the 1960s' call for greater social relevance, architecture schools have been working more diligently, at least for the past several decades. Today, most professional schools of architecture and design include at least some sort of community-based learning opportunities in their curricula. This ongoing change is being driven by the interest of students as much as any other factor. According to the Boyer Report ("Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice"), almost a quarter of students entering architectural education cited "improving the quality of life in their communities" as their top motivation for entering the profession.[xii] Community-engaged educational programs take on many forms in schools of design, but the most commonly found

are Community Design Centers (CDCs) and design-build programs. CDCs are generally small outreach programs that provide pro bono student generated design services to local communities in need, and projects can vary in scale from small parks and street improvement proposals to larger, urban design strategies. Design-build programs typically focus on smaller projects: a single affordable home, a community garden, or school play structure. While these projects are often smaller than those addressed by CDCs, they differ more because they move beyond design services to actually fund and construct the projects, in part or in their entirety. Some of the most notable programs have followed the model of the earliest and most longstanding example, the Yale Building Project that is responsible for building at least one affordable home for needy residents of New Haven each year for the past four decades [xiii] (http://www.architecture.yale.edu/sites/BuildingProject/bp08/home.html). Although not quite as long standing, the Rural Studio, founded by Sam Mockbee and run by Auburn University, is by far the most well-known and influential of the design-build programs[xiv] (http://www.cadc.auburn.edu/soa/rural-studio). Other noteworthy examples include the Studio 804 program at the University of Kansas that has successfully competed with for-profit design firms nationally, winning the coveted Architectural Record House of the Year award twice in the last decade (http://www.studio804.com).

One of the most noteworthy examples of a successful CDC is the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (http://www.arch.udmercy.edu/design_center01.htm). Founded by Dan Pitera a decade ago at the University of Detroit Mercy, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center's mission is to "foster university and community collaborations and partnerships that create inspired and sustainable neighborhoods and spaces for all people."[xv] While there are many university community design initiatives, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center is one of the most

successful and widely acclaimed efforts after the famed Rural Studio. It differs from Rural Studio in both its urban setting and in its wider wide range of projects and collaborations. Rather than focusing primarily on the design and construction of community spaces and structures, they work at multiple scales and with greater breadth and flexibility to address Detroit's numerous challenges. One of the hallmarks of this program is their process of collaboration with artists and designers of all kinds, in order to widen the reach of community-based design well beyond the typical scope of architectural practice. Both the Rural Studio and the Detroit Collaborative Design Center will de discussed in greater depth in Part Two of this essay.

While CDCs were initially more widespread in schools of architecture, they have not seen the same proliferation as design-build programs over the last decade. One reason is that, by offering "design services," some programs have been criticized by local professional groups for unfairly competing with them for commercial business. Since the architectural profession has had a long-standing policy of prohibiting, or more recently, discouraging architects from actually engaging in the physical construction of their projects, design-build has paradoxically been seen as a lesser threat to professional 'business as usual.' The increase of interest in design-build is also attributable to many students' desire to see their designs take physical shape and to make more than a theoretical contribution to their communities.

Still, there is a fair amount of resistance to design-build among many faculty and administrators within design schools. Some see it as 'trade school' rather than 'professional education' and many young faculty members eager to teach in this way are discouraged from doing so by chairs and tenure committees. The difficulty of evaluating 'engaged scholarship' within academia is a well-known hurdle, one that will require, in the words of Imagining America's *Tenure Team Initiative* report, "a culture change"[xvi] in higher education's approach to

community collaborative design education and scholarship. Due to time demands, logistical complexities and liability concerns, these programs are also sometimes located away from the main campus, or are held largely during the summer and are thus perceived by many educators as marginal to the mainstream of professional education. Despite these impediments, community engaged design projects are increasing in number and quality every year. One factor contributing to the recent growth of design-build and CDC programs has been the response of design schools to the re-building efforts in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina.

Another phenomenon to arise out of institutional resistance to community-oriented design education is a small but growing number of private, non-profit education-based service learning programs. Among the most noteworthy is Design Corps (http://www.designcorps.org/). Founded in 1991 by architect Bryan Bell, Design Corps sponsors numerous opportunities for university students and design graduates alike to participate in community oriented design and advocacy projects. Their mission is "to create positive change in communities by providing architecture and planning services. Our vision is realized when people are involved in the decisions that shape their lives, including the built environment."[xvii] Major programs include the placement of "Community Design Fellows" with local organizations, and a summer design-build program for university students from around the world. Design Corps also sponsors an important annual conference called "Structures for Inclusion" which is now in its 9th year, and they have recently edited a collection of essays called *Good Deeds, Good Design*[xviii] that serves as an important resource for students and educators interested in public-service design work.

Non-Profit Advocates for Design in the Public Interest: The Profession Responds

In parallel with the positive directions begun in the schools, a number of private, non-profit advocacy groups have been founded by professionals as offshoots of, or as alternatives to their for-profit practices. Sponsoring lectures, forums, and design competitions and performing noteworthy pro bono projects, these new organizations have proved to be a valuable resource for many young professionals unsatisfied with the opportunities to serve the public interest within their largely corporate professional settings.

Among the most influential is Architecture for Humanity (AFH) (http://www.architectureforhumanity.org). Founded in 1999 by Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr as a non-profit design assistance and advocacy provider, AFH is dedicated to

> building a more sustainable future through the power of professional design. By tapping a network of more than 40,000 professionals willing to lend time and expertise to help those who would not otherwise be able to afford their services, (they) bring design, construction and development services where they are most critically needed.[xix]

AFH sponsors design fellows, competitions and information sharing through their open source website Open Architecture Network (http://www.openarchitecturenetwork.org). AFH has also edited and published a good reference book called *Design Like You Give a Damn*,[xx] described on their website as "a compendium of innovative projects from around the world that demonstrate the power of design to improve lives."[xxi]

Another good example is the group Public Architecture (http://www.publicarchitecture.org). Growing out of the pro bono work of the for-profit firm of Peterson Architects, Public Architecture was incorporated as a separate, freestanding non-profit in 2002. According to their mission statement, "Public Architecture puts the resources of architecture in the service of the public interest. We identify and solve practical problems of

human interaction in the built environment and act as a catalyst for public discourse through education, advocacy and the design of public spaces and amenities."[xxii]

While their pro bono design work is closely tied to the for-profit office -- so much so in fact, that it might be considered by some critics to serve as something of a marketing vehicle -- Public Architecture has spun off an interesting side project called The 1 Percent (http://www.publicarchitecture.org/The_1.htm) whose mission is "to encourage pro bono service within the architecture and design professions." Founded in 2005, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, The 1 Percent functions as an internet-based venue where architects and designers pledge to perform pro bono service projects for one percent of their annual work hours. [xxiii] Once pledged, firms are offered access to potential community partners in need of design services, and project milestones are recorded. The website promises that "If every architecture professional in the U.S. committed 1% of their time to pro bono service, it would add up to 5,000,000 hours annually - the equivalent of a 2,500-person firm, working full-time for the public good."[xxiv] While this may sound like an impressive amount of activity, the truth is that 1 percent of a typical work schedule is only twenty hours (or two-and-a-half work days) per year. And the website offers no data as to how many firms or individual architects have signed up for their challenge as of today.

But, is one percent really enough? Design of our shared environment is an important factor in health, sustainability, social justice, and quality of life for all community members. Unfortunately most people, even in wealthy countries, cannot afford the luxury of expensive design services. While there have been admirable efforts of late to reverse decades of apparent or real neglect of social issues by designers, a smattering of pro bono projects is certainly only a starting point for the kind of real change that is necessary. Rather than remaining a marginal

portion - as little as one percent - of mainstream design practice and education, the interest of the

greater good must be more widely distributed throughout all projects and activities, whether as

pro bono efforts or as central considerations in otherwise privately contracted design services.

Given the recent history outlined here, there is reason to be optimistic that the pendulum is

swinging in the right direction. Still, major challenges remain, some of them deeply rooted in

the very definitions, cultural backgrounds and institutional practices of the design 'professions.'

 "Design for the Other 90%" is an influential exhibition organized by curator Cynthia

Smith of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York, originally installed during

the summer of 2007 and now traveling to other venues including the Walker Art Center in

Minneapolis (http://other90.cooperhewitt.org). According to Smith, the goal of the exhibition is

"to focus on to a broad set of modern social and economic concerns, (in which) … design

innovations often support responsible, sustainable economic policy. They help, rather than

exploit, poorer economies; minimize environmental impact; increase social inclusion; improve

healthcare at all levels; and advance the quality and accessibility of education."[xxv] Organized into

six categories -- shelter, water, health, education, energy, and transport -- the exhibition

addresses the scope of design quite broadly, and focuses mainly on less low cost products that

are having the most widespread impact for the majority of people around the globe.

During the opening presentations, Smith was quick to point out that the focus of the

exhibition was not specifically on poverty or serving those in need, but on the fact that most of

us, whether in developed or developing countries, find ourselves in that category of the "other 90

percent:"

Designers, engineers, students and professors, architects, and social entrepreneurs

from all over the globe are devising cost-effective ways to increase access to food

16

and water, energy, education, healthcare, revenue-generating activities, and

affordable transportation for those who most need them. And an increasing

number of initiatives are providing solutions for underserved populations in

developed countries such as the United States.[xxvi]

Many of the featured projects evidence a commitment to leverage local and global market forces

in unique ways in order to insure that the new products, services, and facilities created involve

client populations as true collaborators and co-creators, and might thereby grow into truly

sustainable and enriching solutions. And while some of the projects are the product of individual

designers, most are the result of inter-disciplinary teams composed of designers and technical

specialists working closely with their partner communities. Rather than construing design in the

public interest as an adjunct to mainstream practice (the 1%), these projects all highlighted the

high degree of innovation being achieved both in academia and in practice, by designers thinking

outside their normative professional boundaries to address issues of much wider social

importance.

PART TWO. Design Education: Re-designing the Design Process Itself

It is easy to identify existing practices that engage their communities more meaningfully, but

changing longstanding attitudes about the role of the designer and adopting new, more

collaborative working methods present real challenges. Part Two addresses the design process by

exploring the defining characteristics of more deeply engaged design, identifying some important

principles that can be employed to improve existing approaches, and elaborating these in two

case studies of best practices.

Two Models: Design Assistance versus Design Engagement

As with any collaborative endeavor, community-engaged design projects vary greatly in their degree of participatory involvement. In fact, the very terminology of traditional design 'services' perpetuates a hierarchy between the design 'professional' and the 'client' to be served. While many academic programs favor the term 'collaborator' or 'community partner,' far too often old biases still prevail. Despite the implicit hierarchy, a client might very well call the shots, or better, work hand in hand with the designers. Yet truly reciprocal collaboration still remains an ideal that must be encouraged at every step of engagement. While professionally trained designers, even as students, bring skills and knowledge to the table that most community members do not possess, many of the most well-intentioned community design projects fail to adequately solicit or even acknowledge the depth of tacit knowledge that resides in our communities and partners.

Design Assistance

Academic programs dedicated to collaborative design, especially design-build projects, face enormous pressures that weigh against the potentially slow pace and unpredictable direction of true community collaboration. I recently interviewed the executive director of an arts organization in a small town recovering from a devastating natural disaster (not unlike the situation in post-Katrina New Orleans). A high profile university design-build program volunteered to build a new home for the organization from scratch, and the building, completed in less than nine months, has won numerous awards. But the director reportedly was told from the start that because of time pressures (needing to complete the project within one academic year) she and other community members "wouldn't really have much input" in the development

18

of the design once under way. I do not intend to diminish the important contribution this project is making to the re-birth of a physically damaged town, but from an educational and social perspective, this kind of one-way relationship from donor of design services to recipient of aid - which I will call the 'Design Assistance' model -leaves much to be desired. Unfortunately though, many factors inherent to the professional and academic systems of reward and advancement weigh strongly against the risks (and potential rewards!) of more open and collaborative partnerships.

In the design professions, accolades and honors are typically assessed based on the formal, visual and functional qualities of the design *objects* that are produced, whether they are buildings, gardens, consumer products or communication tools. Rarely, if ever, is a project recognized for the more intangible *effects* of the design, or of the design process itself, on the community's quality of life and the larger public good. Difficulties in gathering, quantifying and assessing data on these intangibles is compounded by the fact that many of these benefits might not become apparent for years after the initial design collaboration. In academic settings, new community-based projects are often proposed by younger faculty members, but the pressures of tenure review often discourage or limit the scope and effectiveness of their efforts. Beyond the enormous time commitments necessary and the well-documented difficulties of determining how to 'count' this work within the triad of research teaching and service (significantly addressed in Imagining America's *Tenure Team Initiative* report), issues of 'ownership' also become problematic in the design fields since the academic value system continues to reward 'sole authorship' much more highly than it does collaborative efforts.

Given these conditions and existing biases, it should be no surprise that many community-based design projects struggle to truly engage their clients as real collaborators, and

rarely include adequate post-project analysis or reflection. Following the traditional model of professional design services, a more-or-less one way relationship of Design Assistance is often rendered, pro bono, and with the best intentions, but still lacking the true depth and reciprocity that would best serve the larger public good. In formulating a new model that I am calling Design Engagement, many questions arise that have strong implications for both the design professions and their academic counterparts. Most urgent among these questions is: what might a viable Design Engagement project look and feel like?

Design Engagement

Most designers work within fairly well established professional norms of client relationships and design processes. In architecture, the typical design process is codified in the AIA's template for contractual services. Starting with pre-design, the process proceeds to schematic design, design development, construction documents, and construction observation. Although the pre-design and schematic phases are intended to include research into client and community needs, budgets, scope, etc, these do not represent anything near the bulk of the designers work or time commitment, which is reserved for defining the more technical aspects of the object to be built. And while the process is intended to include opportunities for client input and feedback at every stage, there are contractual safeguards included that insure these do not become impediments to the forward trajectory of the project. Furthermore, this rubric has never formally included any sort of post-occupancy feedback or evaluation, and while some of the most conscientious firms and practitioners do return to learn about the outcomes of their hypotheses, most do not. It is clear that this approach to the design process might work for corporate or other paying clients, but simply following the same path, but on a pro bono basis, does not adequately address the

demands of a community-based project that seeks to truly address the public good. The design process itself needs to be re-designed.

In order to move from Design Assistance toward Design Engagement, a more inclusive and collaborative set of design activities need to be proposed, tested, evaluated, and re-imagined. In this scenario, the design schools will continue to play a vital role, but only as long as they are willing to place value on the design process itself, not just on the objects that are but one manifestation of its outcome. In the limited scope of this essay, I will not presume to offer a singular definition of a successful Design Engagement approach. Rather, I propose a set of five principles and practices that seem to be key components, and offer just a few examples of programs that are charting new paths in this direction.

In my experience running several community-collaborative design-build projects and evaluating numerous others, among the most important components of a Design Engagement process are: acknowledging mutual value and values; re-defining problems and opportunities; mutually defining risk, success and failure; creating and renewing structures for communication; and getting serious about feedback, evaluation and reflection. I expand briefly on each of these components, below.

Acknowledging Mutual Value and Values

Much is presumed in a typical Design Assistance approach: that the community brings needs and problems, that the designers bring expertise and solutions, and that everybody wants the same things in the end. In practice nothing could be further from the truth. At the beginning of a Design Engagement process, all parties need to be encouraged to express their expectations, give voice to their values, and acknowledge the value that each party brings to the table. Among the

tools that can help with this process are activities that seek to 'map' the assets –often hidden - both within the community and within the design team. It is likely that unexpected skills, personal experiences, and sources of wisdom will be revealed that will re-shape the entire project from its earliest stages. Clearly articulating mutual needs and desires is also key at this early stage, and admitting that the design team has needs, too (to sharpen their skills or test their methods), is crucial for establishing a relationship of mutuality. Finally, determining the value systems that are unique to each party and discovering important areas of overlap or dissonance are vital to a successful engagement process. All of these activities are probably best achieved through structured conversations, are often enhanced by the sharing of food or simple games like role-playing, and are the first part of any project of careful design.

      Re-Defining Problems and Opportunities

Design is generally a problem-solving activity involving the desire to improve conditions that are considered somehow lacking. The difficulty is that problems that seem obvious to one group or individual are often opaque to another. Furthermore, we are often captive to our disciplinary biases, so that to architects, for example, the best answer to many problems is nearly always found in a new or better building. Open and frank discussion with community partners will likely reveal the underlying complexity of situations and will require all parties to re-consider what the actual opportunities for engagement and intervention may be. Pre-conceived notions should be acknowledged and challenged, and new definitions of potential activity explored. It is not unlikely that the key design breakthrough might come, like a lightening bolt, at this early and formative stage of collaboration. Again, this exploration is best conducted as a form of conversation –of the 'what if' variety – and supported by open-ended activities like word

association games. The key role for designers in this interaction is to encourage, guide, and record this exploration of needs and opportunities in the form of questions and possibilities. The difficulty for designers, whether novice or experienced, is to resist the temptation to jump to conclusions or propose immediate solutions –which could actually short-circuit the important process of re-defining the task at hand.

Mutually Defining Success, Failure, and Risk

Every project of even the most modest means involves risk. What constitutes a real risk and how much risk might be tolerated varies widely among different individuals and groups. All parties in a design process need to articulate what they see as being at stake, and to honestly assess and express their willingness to take risks. A related discussion is identifying the conditions that will mark the success of a project and, more importantly, those that will signify failure. Projects can succeed or fail in many different ways, across a range of scales, and most often a project will conclude with some combination of successes and failures. It is important to establish the continuum of goal achievement, and to give voice to mutual expectations early on in a project. But it seems to go against the generally positivist nature of problem-solving activities and the shared optimism of well-intentioned community participation to even acknowledge the possibility of failures, large or small. Frankness and objectivity exercised early in a collaborative process is healthy for all participants and for the overall outcome of the project. Working to articulate, negotiate, and record these initial expectations will not only allow for more effective collaboration when the inevitable bumps appear in the road, but will also form the basis for, and structure of, post-project evaluation and assessment.

Creating and Renewing Structures for Communication

On one level, a design project can be characterized as a sort of focused conversation that guides the allocation of resources in productive ways. No conversation is ever complete or completely successful, and every dialog can be improved upon, even while it is ongoing. It would be impossible, even counterproductive, to try to characterize the best method for insuring clear communication. It is easy to imagine however, that any communication process can be improved upon if it is approached as a design challenge. Like the response to any good design problem, the first formulation is unlikely to be the best possible approach, and ongoing refinement of the design communication process is beneficial. Based upon periodic feedback from all members of a conversation, changes and (hopefully) improvements can always be made. New digital tools like user-generated 'blogs' or 'wiki' sites on the internet, and currently emerging Twitter posts might offer possibilities to increase the effectiveness of communication. But there still exists a very real digital divide between socio-economic and generational groups, and face-to-face communication will likely remain the best and most inclusive technology for some time to come. Creating the best conditions for this, or any kind of communication, remains a worthy design challenge in itself, and is crucial to the health and success of any collaboration.

Getting Serious about Feedback, Evaluation, and Reflection

Although it seems obvious that critical reflection on the successes and failures of a design collaboration is not only productive, but essential for positive growth and community development, it is sadly lacking in most design projects. Perhaps it is human nature to focus mainly on the positive and to gloss over or ignore the sometimes painful but always useful critical lessons we can glean from any project. In the field of urban design and public housing,

the use of "post-occupancy evaluations" (POPs) has been growing since the 1960s. These usually

take the form of surveys conducted by academic or advocacy groups and are often aimed at

uncovering breakdowns in communication and failures of the design process. Rarely are they the

product of the initial design team or even of the original community groups involved with the

design process. Employed in this way, as a sort of 'post-mortem' tool, POPs are largely

disdained by many design professionals. This state of affairs serves mainly to perpetuate one-

way models of Design Assistance, and to result in professional retrenchment, rather than

encouraging designers to adjust their design processes to favor improved collaboration.

In order for feedback to be truly productive it must be solicited by the designers

themselves –in ways that are as objective as possible, and incorporated creatively into each new

design project. While this remains one of the most difficult aspects of a truly engaged design

collaboration to achieve, some hope can be found in the growing trend of compiling case-studies

that document completed projects. Driven in part by new demands for sustainability, the practice

of revisiting buildings to assess energy performance is a short step away from evaluating larger

aspects of sustainability like how well the building serves its occupants, its neighbors, and its

community. In academic projects, students are often asked to produce written reflections on their

educational experiences. This practice could be extended to include feedback from project

collaborators and other community members as well. The ability to re-integrate this feedback

into refined design processes will be a hallmark of truly successful community-engaged design

projects of the future.

While these five approaches to improving collaborative design are not exhaustive, they

might help to establish a starting point for imagining new practices that challenge the status quo

of one-way Design Assistance models. For community-engaged design to become the norm, and

for design to serve the public good in more productive ways, our design processes themselves must be re-considered. The following case studies embody important aspects that contribute to the formulation of new and more engaged practices of design in the public interest.

Best Practices: Two Noteworthy University Based Programs

Earlier in this essay I mentioned both Auburn University's Rural Studio and the University of Detroit Mercy's Collaborative Design Center. I would like to return to them now in order to emphasize some important aspects of these two very different programs that make them outstanding models.

Rural Studio

As its name states, the Rural Studio dedicates its work to improving the living conditions of Alabama's rural residents, specifically in remote Hale County. This location, more than two hours' drive from Auburn's main campus, certainly imposes logistical challenges. But rather than work from a long distance, as a Design Assistance approach might favor, students and faculty have, from the start of the program, relocated to live and work in the community with which they are partnering. This commitment to direct engagement, combined with the fact that many of the projects undertaken by graduate students as their final thesis might last for a year or longer, results in a collaborative bond that is truly remarkable. Over almost two decades, the residents of Hale County have come to understand that their role in this collaboration extends far beyond simply being the grateful recipients of aid; their own valuable contribution to the education of fledgling architects is a key aspect of the program.

Originally focusing on the provision of improved homes for county residents in need, the program has grown to tackle larger community structures including the construction of a new firehouse. Opportunities have been developed that allow undergraduate students to participate for the duration of a single semester, and for teams of graduate students to propose and develop their own thesis projects that are quite ambitious and require time commitments longer than an academic semester. A new aspect of the program brings in students from outside Auburn University (many of them from outside the US) to work on the problem of designing affordable housing prototypes that can be built without volunteer labor. Called the 20K House Project, this effort has already produced numerous prototypes of $20,000 houses, and is particularly noteworthy because it is aimed not at charity but at helping local, for-profit industries develop economically sustainable strategies for affordable housing construction while creating new jobs for community members.

Admittedly, the Rural Studio model of relocating entire groups of students and faculty is not easily reproducible, but neither is it necessary in order to foster truly collaborative projects. What is truly exemplary is their commitment to break down the physical and social barriers between design 'professionals' and the clients they serve, to build and renew strong reciprocal relationships over a long period of time. Their approach acknowledges the great value brought to the program by their community partners, and encourages the community to develop ever greater degrees of self-sufficiency through projects aimed not simply at providing assistance but at engaging with the community to expand local resources of all kinds.

Detroit Collaborative Design Center

While on the surface the Detroit Collaborative Design Center might seem almost the polar opposite of the Rural Studio, many of its best attributes also apply to this most urban of programs. Breaking down barriers between 'town and gown' might be even more difficult when social and economic divides are defined within minutes of walking, rather than hours of driving. Yet the Detroit Collaborative Design Center's success at directly engaging community members, and involving them actively in every aspect of their projects, is a hallmark of their work. Rather than operating as a traditional urban design or architecture practice in any normative sense of those professional models, they function as urban artists or production coordinators of the art or cultural work of others. On their website, they list three large categories of their activities: "Neighborhood Spaces" (parks and the like), "Neighborhood Development Strategies" (larger collaborative assessment and planning projects) and "Neighborhood Catalysts." This last category contains very unusual and intriguing projects like one called "Firebreak."[xxvii]

Firebreak consists of serial interventions in some of the burned out houses around Detroit. Projects included wrapping houses in cellophane ("Housewrap"), working with an artist to imprint the exterior of a house with layers of liquid latex that are later removed and displayed in galleries ("House Print"), converting a house into an outdoor movie venue by painting it entirely white and projecting onto its surface ("Movie House"), and engaging local musicians to perform from inside a specially prepared house for residents enjoying a neighborhood festival in the adjacent abandoned lot ("Sound House"). These initiatives - seven so far - were all planned and performed with intense community involvement and most often were the result of collaborations with local artists, rappers, and community organizers.

According to the founder and director of the Detroit CDC, Dan Pitera:

The intent of this work is not to 'clean-up' or to erase this residue developed through adaptation. It can coexist simultaneously with a revitalizing urban fabric. The residue itself—the "gap," the vacancy, the abandonment—has become the space of social, cultural, and environmental actions, interactions, and reactions. What is seen as void of culture is actually culturally rich."[xxviii]

Described on their website collectively as "guerilla insertions," these projects greatly expand the typical definition of what night be considered 'design,' especially within the context of architectural education.

Conclusions

In Robert Goodman's 1972 book *After the Planners*, he presents a blistering critique of the kind of post-war urban planning that resulted in socially destructive urban renewal and highway construction, often through disadvantaged urban neighborhoods.[xxix] Harvard Professor George Baird describes Goodman's contributions to architecture and politics:

…for Goodman the entire formal apparatus of architecture had become at best irrelevant, and at worst oppressive. He concluded by calling for architects to reject what he saw as their traditional roles: "Instead of remaining the 'outside expert' trying to resolve the conflicting needs of the low-middle-high income metropolis, or simply 'helping the poor,' we can become participants in our own community's search for new family structures or other changing patterns of association, and participants in the process of creating physical settings which would foster these ways of life—in effect, we become a part of rather than an expert for, cultural change. [xxx]

Goodman goes on to describe this new approach -- in his words a new "style of action" -- as a form of "guerilla architecture."[xxxi] Perhaps this style of action might serve as a new model for the professional activities of architects, planners, and designers of all kinds who strive for greater social relevance.

Longstanding notions of professional status, privilege and social responsibility, while useful in maintaining minimum standards and keeping the risk of public harm at bay, do not adequately serve the intense need in our societies for greater inclusion, participation, and collaboration in working toward social justice and the greater public good. We need to explore, document, and share fresh approaches to design in the pursuit of greater social good, both in academia and in commercial practice. If design continues to be construed too narrowly as merely the creation of *objects,* no matter how beautiful or well functioning, then the status quo of misaligned priorities, social isolation, and cultural misunderstanding will be perpetuated. If, however, designers engage in a critical re-working of the design *process* itself, by exploring more effective ways to work collaboratively and embed their work within the richness of their various communities, then the greater public good might truly be served.

Notes

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[iv] "INSTITUTE GUIDELINES to Assist AIA Members, Firms and Components in Undertaking Pro Bono Service Activities,"

http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia_members_only/documents/pdf/aiab043436.pdf, accessed 08/12/2009, (Washington, DC: the American Institute of Architects, 2008), p.6.

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[vi] Ibid., p.2.

[vii] http://www.naab.org/accreditation/2004_Conditions.aspx, accessed 08/12/2009.

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