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## Where We Stand

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## Where We Stand

*Mike Newman and Rashmi Ramaswamy*  
*SHED Studio*

We are at a unique moment in global history. Against the backdrop of social and economic upheaval, there is growing awareness that our current systems and lifestyles disempower us and are not sustainable. The world's resources are finite and inequitably distributed. People throughout the world are embracing their inner activist and demanding the right to shape their own destinies. This global shift and desire for change has unleashed creative energy around “what” we do or make and “how” we define what we do. As shapers of the built environment, architects are directly engaged in physically making this world, and hence our work has the potential to affect significant change. This is the context for most public interest design practices in the world today.

In the spectrum of practices ranging from pro-bono studios within larger firms, and mission-driven for-profit firms, to non-profit community design centers, and university-led design programs, our practice, SHED Studio, occupies the niche of a mission-driven, for-profit design firm. We began our firm with the core value of social change and the desire to serve those living in under-resourced communities who are not traditionally represented.

We use design as a tool for engagement, so that communities can own and frame the issues and consequently design solutions that are more complete and innovative in response to the complexity of the is-

ues. We strive to look at each project, not by isolated cases within them, but as part of a big picture of the problem we are trying to solve, and understand how the root causes can be addressed. We engage neighborhood residents in defining the vision, designing the project, creating a template linking local actions, and contributing resources to implement the vision, using a multi-level process which is more robust than typical participatory design practices. With our clients as partners, we re-imagine economically devastated neighborhoods with vacant lots and dilapidated buildings as areas of fertile, green, productive activity, full of potential, and build the human and physical “infrastructure” to under-grid this vision. We have used strategies to involve people with the process of city-making, ranging from direct participation to creative interdisciplinary interactions so each person can set the agenda and design solutions. This has led us to re-imagine every part of the city as having the potential to be a thriving center of productive life, instead of urban blight.

Over time, working with people in marginalized communities, where limited resources have to leverage other opportunities, and the need for people to focus on program implementation, limits their ability to creatively frame issues and design solutions, we have learned the complexity of what goes into undertaking a public interest design project. The Growing Home project is a case study that illustrates this.

### Case Study

Englewood Food, Fitness and Health Master Planning and Growing Home Farm and Job Training Center

Project Partners  
Center for Urban Transformation (CUT)  
Teamwork Englewood  
Growing Home  
SHED Studio  
Center to Reduce Obesity in Chicago  
Children  
Designs for Dignity

SHED started working in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago in 2006, assisting Growing Home, an organization providing job training and employment opportunities in the urban agriculture sector. The neighborhood was one of several communities in Chicago that had received funding to develop a strategic plan to enhance the quality of life of its residents. Englewood is a neighborhood with a predominantly African-American population, and the residents were concerned with the lack of both quantity and diversity of access to fresh, nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods. Additionally, they were concerned with the negative impact to individual and family health from increasing rates of heart disease, obesity, and asthma, to reduced attendance and performance at school and jobs. Thus, one of the focal points of the plan identified a desire to develop a green agricultural district in the neighborhood, and to pro-

mote healthy lifestyles that included physical fitness, good nutrition, and better use of health-care resources. SHED began by re-envisioning the agricultural district as a “necklace” of farms that flanked an abandoned, elevated railroad track, which would become a community park. The concept sparked the imagination of the community and the city, and eventually became an organizing factor for various projects in the neighborhood.

In 2008, SHED partnered with the Center for Urban Transformation (CUT) to conduct a planning process to capture the community's vision and to assist in fleshing out the food, fitness, and health goals in the Quality of Life Plan. We engaged a variety of people within and outside the neighborhood in an interactive conversation to generate ideas, obtain valuable input, and build consensus about various projects that would seed future efforts. A work-plan document and schedule was developed at the end of the process and local sub-committees were formed.

Various ongoing efforts anchored the plan, including community gardens and the Growing Home Farm. Subsequent projects fit into the work-plan, including a food business center, proposed by CUT, Growing Home, and SHED, and a design for a park along the elevated railroad.

SHED also worked on the design and master plan of a new urban campus for the Growing Home Farm and Job Training Center in



Englewood. The first phase, completed in 2009, is a small but packed 27,000-square-foot site full of growing fields, hoop houses, a building to accommodate classrooms and administrative spaces, as well as community amenities such as farm stands, recycling, and composting areas. This site functions as the

main hub for future phases and related food entrepreneurial ventures. SHED partnered with Designs for Dignity, a non-profit donating pro-bono interior design services, in pursuing design issues and finding donations such as furniture, lighting, and equipment to design a lovely interior to the urban “barn.”

After a period of observation, refinement, and feedback from staff and community, phase two, a 40,000-square foot site focused on production, commenced in 2010. Site construction was complete in 2012 and growing has now commenced. After the expansion site has been in operation for a period of time,

funding will be sought to construct a “tower of power” to generate electricity through the use of solar photovoltaics and wind turbines. A green roof and solar hot water heating system will also be installed.

The eventual goal for the organization is to develop more satellite grow-



ing sites and to become completely economically self-sustaining.

## Where We Stand

### Community

We use the design process to help community groups bring the knowledge that they already have to the table, and to participate in not only framing the solution, but also in framing the issue that they are trying to solve. Thus, the broader the community representation, the more likely it is that the issue fully represents the complexity of the situation. However, we often find that it is difficult to obtain such diverse representation, due to scheduling, vested interests, and other limitations. We try to address this by having numerous occasions for community participation, but often this still doesn't capture all aspects. Our approach is to be prepared to move the issue and its design solution forward, while at the same time being open to the fact that another aspect may need to be incorporated.

### Education

We believe that it is not critical for public interest design to be taught at architectural schools. Rather, it is more important for architecture students to develop their design capabilities, and understand that there are a variety of approaches to providing design services. Part of the design instruction should include strategies on having dialogues with clients to obtain critical information, spark the client's imagination, and discuss tactics to meet budget while satisfying program—all of which are important, regardless of whether the client and project are part of the public interest design sphere.

### Working Within Budgets

Working with clients, very small budgets, and limited resources, we often find that we are trying to skim so much cost off the top, that it com-

promises the quality and practical viability of the solution, as well as diminishes its potential to excite the imagination and create magical moments. At these times, we struggle with whether we should advise the client to defer the project until they can raise more finances, or work with what they have, understanding that even the limited solution has a role in serving their social mission. We have found that the most successful approach is to maintain an open dialogue with the client about the level of compromise they may be making, thus allowing them to make a more informed decision. Sometimes this results in an increased budget, other times we carry forward with the limited funds, and occasionally we are able to mobilize the organization to leverage salvaged or donated materials to stretch the budget.

### Charrettes

We use design charrettes in a variety of ways in the design process. Using them to generate ideas is like flying without a safety net. One has to be truly open to the possibility that genuinely good ideas can emerge just by stepping back and providing communities with design tools to create their own solutions. In such situations, the role of architects is to understand the essence of these ideas, and to use our unique training to translate them into spatial solutions. Sometimes, the dynamic in a group is electric and several ideas pour forth. However, there are also occasions in which the group is not "vibing," and ideas are not being generated. At these times, we roll up our sleeves and lead the group through structured visioning and input processes that enable them to engage with the issue to the best of their capacity. This leads, at the very least, to obtaining buy-in and at best, to complete engagement.

### Architects and Activism

In our firm, we see our role as architects requiring us to show up and



*New Horizons Garden*



*Community involvement*

participate in discussions with activists and community organizers engaged in figuring out how to solve the social needs of a community. We participate both as architects and as activists, with the understanding that we are each capable of wearing multiple hats. By being involved in the open discussion, we are often part of the energy that develops and

generates solutions. This occasionally leads us to play roles which are not strictly architectural; for example we have run meetings, helped write business plans, and contributed in other ways, which has led us to have a much broader definition of what the field of architecture entails. We appreciate that this method is not the best fit for everyone, but feel that





*Discussions with activists and community organizers*



*Growing Home*



*New Horizons Garden*



*Growing Home*

by demonstrating this free-wheeling approach to architecture, we present this as one of the options in the buffet of architectural practices. In this guise, we are often activating and developing projects as part of a broader group.

### Collaboration

We deeply believe in collaboration, and have an appreciation of the richness that can emerge from a collaborative design process. Often we are very lucky to see this excitement come to fruition. However, collaboration is not easy. It requires a lot of finesse to work with different, often disparate, visions and unite them into one cohesive design. Additionally, it takes a lot of patience to work with the different schedules and design processes of the collaborators and to have faith in the collective's capability to deliver a complex solution that will meet the client's needs better than a singular vision. Is this always true? Sometimes, our design skills are equally utilized in designing the collaborative process as they are in presenting our design vision.

### Roadblocks and Moving Forward

In our efforts to participate in pushing through the roadblocks, we have seen both success and creation of new ordinances that change the baseline, and also situations where there is no way forward. We feel that when the community vision hits a roadblock, it is useful to reframe the issue from another place. There are times that we participate in advocacy groups that help shift opinion around the issue, times that we create art exhibits that raise consciousness, and other times we participate in a similar project at a different location that doesn't have the same barriers, to demonstrate the viability of the vision.

### Desires, Designs, and Innovation

We have found that the cultural context of a solution is more important

to the community than a new innovative solution. For example, a community may prefer to have its affordable housing look like everything else on the block, firstly to ensure that it is of comparable quality, and secondly to ensure that its inhabitants are not discriminated against. Is innovation important in this situation, or is it more important to offer the tried and true solution? We adopt a +1 approach to design, which means that while we locate the solution within a community's comfort zone, we also encourage them to innovate in at least one way, thus changing their baseline to develop a more effective solution. These innovations may occur in the realm of sustainability, aesthetic appearance, or spatial and programmatic layouts that depart from the conventional solution. We thus bring the community forward in development and innovation.