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THE STATE OF COMMUNITY DESIGN:
AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY DESIGN CENTER SERVICES

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## ABSTRACT

Community design is a specific type practice rooted in participatory and emancipatory notions of planning and design to overcome environmental, social and economic injustice at low or no cost to the client. Since its beginnings in the early 1960's, many of community design's early and then-radical ideas have become more mainstream. In order to assess the state of modern community design, in comparison to its activist roots, this project reviews the websites of 81 community design centers in the United States to ascertain the approaches that centers use in order to successfully achieve operational goals. The research suggests that the clients of community design centers are no longer limited to low-income communities, and while there are a set of core approaches that define community design practice in 2012, locally appropriate and entrepreneurial solutions provide community design with a broad-based toolkit from which practitioners can draw in order to stay relevant and solvent.

## INTRODUCTION

Community planning and design, or what longtime practitioner Henry Sanoff (2007) has perhaps more precisely called "community based design," is a specific type of participatory planning and design undertaking, "done *with* rather than *on* the community," (p. 23, emphasis added) and intended to "contribute in some way to improving the lives of those living in the community" (p. 23) primarily through physical planning and design. The concept is now firmly middle-aged, with the first neighborhood design centers and much of the foundational theory dating from the early 1960's. Today many private sector planners and designers work with under-served communities in both reduced fee-for-service and pro bono roles, and others are employed by non-governmental advocacy organizations, social service providers and community development corporations. Academics also conduct studio courses to provide plans or conceptual designs at low or no cost to community groups and many so-called "community design centers" exist specifically for the purpose of providing design and planning expertise to communities at low cost.

Analyzing the state of community design in the early 1980's, Mary Comerio (1984a, 1984b) argued that, over its first 20 years of existence the field had "become less idealistic and more pragmatic" (1984b, p. iii) and suggested that community designers had become "entrepreneurs, identifying a new set of issues in the environmental problemscape" (p. iii) focused on creating tangible and useful products for local communities instead of attempting "sweeping social change" (p. iii). Comerio argued that economic and social considerations had shaped the practice and suggested, "To be significant, successful community design has to develop multiple agendas," (Comerio, 1984b, p. 57) including not only "visible physical improvements," but also creating alternatives to the economic status quo (e.g. affordable housing), advocating for environmental and economic justice, and "building people" through education, advice, and social service provision. "Community design may not be able to do all these things at once," she concluded, "but its survival and success in the 1980s will ultimately depend on its capacity to take on some combination of these tasks, and develop a strategy that is as just as it is pragmatic," (p. 57).

A quarter century after Comerio made these observations, we revisit her thesis to see how community design has continued to address these challenges. We begin with the same simple research question Comerio first posited: "What, in fact, is community design doing these days?" (Comerio 1984b, p. 1). To do so, we analyze community design center websites, seeking to better understand what range of activities community based designers currently employ in their attempts to assist local communities while simultaneously operating in increasingly constrained funding environments and under heightened scrutiny to provide tangible benefits to satisfy academic and philanthropic funders.

The first section of the paper presents a history of community design and outlines challenges presented by the complex social, institutional, and financial environments in which community-based work occurs. We then describe the methodology we used to assess the range of services currently provided by community design centers in the United States. In the final sections we present findings from this analysis and suggest ways in which this information can be useful to community design practice and also to the education of planners and designers.

## WHY STUDY COMMUNITY DESIGN?

First, a note on terminology. The type of practice analyzed here is colloquially called "community design," but this terminology is imperfect. Toker (2007) notes that the term can also be used to describe developer-driven master planning and other processes that do not necessarily focus on participatory engagement or assisting disadvantaged groups, which are foundational tenets of what has long been called "community design" by practitioners. Yet, while Henry Sanoff's term "community based design" might thus be more specific, we nonetheless retain the use of "community design" because of its longstanding vernacular use, which encompasses physical and spatial planning and design generally in the purview of urban planners, architects and landscape architects.

This specific type of community design was born in the 1960's, with pioneering work occurring particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom (where the practice was called "community architecture"). The 1960's were a time of great social change, and the professions of architecture and urban planning were not immune, with the community design movement both a product of, and arguably also a driver of, these changes. Common mythology traces the beginnings of the community design movement to a 1968 keynote

speech given to the annual convention of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) by National Urban League Executive Director Whitney M. Young, Jr. in which Young excoriated the profession for their role in designs, policies and hiring that created or perpetuated racial divisions. However, the roots of community design clearly date from much earlier in the 1960's, at minimum.

In *Community Architecture: How People Are Creating Their Own Environment,* Wates and Knevitt (1987) trace the conceptual beginnings of community design/community architecture to foundational texts such as Jane Jacobs' *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), while Nan Ellin in *Postmodern Urbanism* (1996) credits Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960) with serving as "inspiration" (Ellin 1996, p. 65) for early community design efforts and other participatory and engaged approaches to planning and design. Simultaneously, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) helped to galvanize an American environmental movement while sociologist Herbert Gans (1962) famously dissected Boston's urban renewal programs in *The Urban Villagers,* one of many tracts lamenting the dehumanizing trends in contemporary urban development (see also Gutkind 1962, Gordon 1963, Anderson 1964, Gruen 1964, Abrams 1965 among others). Paul Davidoff published his seminal article, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning" in the *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* in 1965, having founded Planners for Equal Opportunity (PEO) with Walter Thabit and others the previous year. Each of these early influences coalesced to galvanize a nascent community design movement by the early to mid 1960's.

Furthermore, pioneering community designer Karl Linn, a landscape architect and professor at the University of Pennsylvania founded what can likely be labeled the first community design center in Philadelphia (the Neighborhood Renewal Corps) in 1961 (Fox 2005). Other early community design centers were likewise already in operation by the time of Young's 1968 speech, in New York City (Pratt Center for Community Development in Brooklyn in 1963 and the Architectural Renewal Committee, or ARCH, in Harlem, also in 1963); San Francisco, CA (University of California at San Francisco Community Design Center in 1967) and Boston, MA (Urban Planning Aid in 1966). Most early centers were volunteer-run operations, or outgrowths of university planning or architecture programs. Some, such as ARCH, Urban Planning Aid and the UCSF's Community Design Center initially received federal funding through an advocacy planning demonstration grant program operated by the Housing Branch of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) between 1967 and 1969 (Blecher 1971). Many university-affiliated centers have subsequently received funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), such as direct funding through the Community Outreach Partnership Center Program (COPC) and indirectly through city governments via the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program.

The early growth of community design and community architecture across the United States and United Kingdom were at least partially in response to top-down master planning and the perceived disconnect between mainstream planners and designers on the one hand and citizens, particularly poor communities and communities of color, on the other. As Peter Hall notes in his encyclopedic *Cities of Tomorrow*, the early days of community design were often antagonistic battles over freeway proposals and other urban renewal schemes; the atmosphere was chaotic, *ad hoc*, and sometimes little was accomplished. "Nevertheless," Hall notes, "the style was very different from anything known before: it stressed the needs of the client rather than the nature of the product and it used a variety of methods to tailor the solution to those needs." (Hall 1996 p. 264).

But by the end of the 1960's some of the tenets of community design – especially discussions about the appropriate role for citizen input in the planning and design of cities – had become mainstream. One example is the publication in the UK of *People and Planning* in 1969, also known as *The Skeffington Report* after its chair A.M Skeffington, M.P. Appointed in 1968, the Committee on Public Participation in Planning's report included case studies and detailed recommendations for creating more citizen-centric local planning practice. This was a radical notion in planning circles, departing decisively from the highly technological and managerial notion of planning that had been in vogue in the US and UK for the previous two decades based in large part on the successes of similar approaches in wartime planning and postwar reconstruction during and after the Second World War. While the emergence of early community design practices were certainly not the only forces that moved planning and design practice in more participatory directions, they were embedded within a larger shift that was occurred throughout that decade and into the 1970's.

Early momentum in the community design movement culminated with the formation of the Association for Community Design in 1977 to facilitate exchange of information and ideas among community design centers. ACD's seven core values frame the practice of community design and captured much of its underlying motivations:

(1) Equity & Justice: Advocating with those that have a limited voice in public life
(2) Diversity: Promoting social equality through discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities
(3) Participatory Decision-Making: Building structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow communities to make decisions
(4) Quality of Life: Advancing the right of every person to live in a socially, economically, and environmentally healthy community
(5) Integrative Approach: Creating strategies that reach beyond the design of the built environment
(6) Place-based Solutions: Generating ideas that grow from place and build local capacity
(7) Design Excellence: Promoting the highest standards of quality in the design and construction of the built environment (Association for Community Design, 2011)

Contemporary community design encompasses many different approaches to practice, and there is no single definition. In 1984 Comerio framed community design as an "attempt to identify and solve a particular set of environmental problems in which the client is a special interest group, and the problems may be social, economic, and political as well as physical" (1984b, p i). Ron Shiffman, founder and Director Emeritus of the Pratt Center for Community Development and one of the best-known community design practitioners working today, defines it as "a fundamental recasting of urban and regional planning, architecture and community building," resulting in "a more trans-disciplinary approach to design and community development" (Shiffman 2006, p. 4). Modern community design centers doing the kind of work Comerio and Shiffman describe are a mix of standalone non-profit corporations and university-affiliated centers that employ planning and design in localized, participatory, and multi-disciplinary fashions, attempting to enhance the livability of communities traditionally under-served by public and private sector planning and design. But while a core value of community design is a focus on marginalized populations, it is certainly not limited to poor urban neighborhoods, and many of the centers analyzed below also work with middle-class neighborhood groups, cash-strapped cities, rural communities, *ad hoc* citizen groups, regional coalitions, small business owners, non-profit groups, schools, and

other types of clients for whom market-rate design and planning services are just too far out of reach.

The literature on community design includes many compelling arguments for the practice as a powerful, transformative act for practitioners and clients (e.g. Goodman 1971, Pearson 2002, Bell 2004, Hou et al 2005, Architecture for Humanity 2006, Bell and Wakeford 2008), descriptions of successful community engagement and design projects (Sachner 1983, Forsyth et al 1999) and handbooks for conducting participatory design work (Hester 1975, 2006, Sanoff 2000). But despite benefits and successes promoted in the literature, community design faces numerous barriers. Increasingly, federal, state and municipal funding opportunities for community design work are constrained by fiscal crises at all levels of government, impacting both standalone and university-based community design centers. Philanthropies and foundations are likewise increasingly unable to fund community design practice at levels seen in previous eras. Working with often marginalized, vulnerable, low-income communities is inherently challenging; the very idea of engaging with a community requires some level of community organization in the first place. This paradoxical environment is one in which design centers must learn to operate effectively and which planners and designers are not necessarily trained for. Increasingly, as Comerio foresaw, community design practice has developed into an example of social entrepreneurship -- neither profit-motivated, nor traditional social service provision, nor merely advocacy. As Hartigan and Billimoria (2005) explain, social entrepreneurs:

> "undertake both public and private sector functions simultaneously. On the one hand, they work with people that governments have been unable to reach effectively with basic public goods and services. On the other, they address market failures by providing access to private goods and services to markets where business does not operate because the risks are too great and the financial rewards too few" (p. 19).

In the following section we analyze the approaches and services used by various design centers to bridge these gaps.

## METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research is to assess the current state of community design. We first use a screening process to identify a set of 81 community design centers currently in operation in the United States. We then develop a typology of community design services based on a survey of the websites of the community design centers in our set.

*Research sample*
Each community design center is unique. Services offered vary widely based on local needs and design center resources. To better understand what kinds of services comprise the breadth of community design practice, we analyzed the websites of 81 existing communities design centers. We identified our sample first by compiling a list of all entities called, or calling themselves, community design centers found in the literature cited in this article, as well as the membership roster of the ACD and three special issues of the German architectural journal *An Architektur* (2008a, 2008b, 2008c) devoted to the history of American community design. We also conducted extensive web-based searches for the terms "community design center," "community planning center" and their derivatives.

The resultant list included 176 candidate entities. We omitted all centers for which no website could be found, whose websites stated they were defunct, or that offered no details about services offered or project archives. In many cases, subjective determinations also had to be made. Community design is a broad, malleable and fluid concept, perhaps based as much on the attitude or ethical approach of the practitioner as the type of clients they work for or what services they provide. Nonetheless, based on the ACD's definition of community design as well as an expectation that community design is social venture (i.e. not for profit), we established three minimum requirements for inclusion in the analysis:

1) Architectural design, landscape design or planning services appear to make up the core of the center's services, in addition to any other services offered. Many public and private organizations work with communities, which may include some planning or design projects, but that does not *de facto* make them community design centers.[i] For instance, Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx) in New York City and The Urban Community Research Center (UCRC) at California State University - Dominguez Hills analyze and solve urban issues, but do not focus on physical planning or design services.[ii] We also omitted organizations that directly develop affordable housing; such entities, known as community development corporations (CDCs) in the United States, typically build and manage affordable housing but do not primarily focus on planning or design for the larger community.

2) The center focuses primarily on under-served clientele, or as the ACD describes, those who "have a limited voice in public life." Low-income neighborhood groups, non-profit organizations and schools are common clients for design centers, but there is some subjectivity and variability in this category. Increasingly community designers are working for municipalities, as public sector planning faces increasing budgetary limitations. Private clients like low-income homeowners and small business owners, were acceptable, so long as private clients capable of paying full-cost design fees did not appear to be a majority of the center's clientele. Design Coalition of Madison, WI exemplifies this difficult balance. They were excluded from analysis because, as their website states, "We work on two fronts, on our design projects and on community efforts. To successfully operate a design practice in this way means that we have to discover a mix – finding grant monies to provide needed services and develop innovative projects, and working within the market system as 'normal' architects. This mix continuously changes," (Design Coalition, 2011). Although Design Coalition illustrates some progressive approaches to practice, their market rate services appeared too substantial to qualify as a community design center using our definition. Estudio Teddy Cruz in La Jolla, CA and Barrio Planners Incorporated in Los Angeles, which began as a non-profit community design center in 1971 and became a for-profit design firm in 1982, were also excluded.

3) The center is a non-profit organization or university-affiliated. The city of Charleston, SC has a Civic Design Center; Raleigh, NC an Urban Design Center and Seattle, WA a department called CityDesign, all of which turned up in our search for community design centers. But such entities, in our determination, do not meet the ACD definition of community design; they are units of local government that promote design excellence or provide technical assistance, but do not have a participatory or social equity focus that is a core trait of community design. Among university-affiliated centers, each had to possess, as far as could be determined, some minimal autonomous standing beyond merely an *ad hoc* collection of studio courses.

Based on these constraints the 176 candidates were narrowed to the list of 81 centers listed in Table 1.[iii]

| Design Center Name | University Affiliation | City | ST |
|---|---|---|---|
| Rural Studio - Auburn | Auburn University | Auburn | AL |
| Urban Studio (Formally the Auburn University Center for Architecture and Urban Studies) | Auburn University | Auburn | AL |
| University of Arkansas Community Design Center | University of Arkansas | Fayetteville | AR |
| Donaghy Project for Urban Studies and Design | University of Arkansas Little Rock | Little Rock | AR |
| Stardust Center for Affordable Homes and the Family | Arizona State University | Phoenix | AZ |
| Phoenix Urban Research Laboratory (PURL) | Arizona State University | Phoenix | AZ |
| Tejido Group | University of Arizona | Tucson | AZ |
| Groundwork Institute | | Berkeley | CA |
| Arid Lands Institute | Woodbury University | Burbank | CA |
| Architecture + Civic Engagement Center (ACE Center) | Woodbury University | Burbank | CA |
| SCI-Arc Community Design Program | SCI-Arc | Los Angeles | CA |
| Urban Ecology | | Oakland | CA |
| Asian Neighborhood Design | | San Francisco | CA |
| Public Architecture | | San Francisco | CA |
| The Colorado Center for Community Development | University of Colorado Denver | Denver | CO |
| Yale Urban Design Workshop | Yale University | New Haven | CT |
| Community Design Services of the Washington Architectural Foundation | | Washington | DC |
| Catholic University of America Design Collaborative | Catholic University of America | Washington | DC |
| The Center for Building Better Communities | University of Florida | Gainesville | FL |
| Florida Community Design Center | | Gainesville | FL |
| Center for Urban and Community Design (CUCD) | University of Miami | Miami | FL |
| Florida Center for Community Design + Research | University of South Florida | Tampa | FL |
| Center for Community Design and Preservation | University of GA | Athens | GA |
| PLaCE (Partnering Landscape and Community Enhancement) | Iowa State University | Ames | IA |
| Archeworks | Archeworks | Chicago | IL |
| archi-treasures | | Chicago | IL |
| East St. Louis Action Research Project | University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign | Urbana | IL |
| Ball State College of Architecture and Planning: Indianapolis Center (CAP:IC) | Ball State University | Indianapolis | IN |
| Ball State College of Architecture and Planning:Community Based Projects (CBP) | Ball State University | Muncie | IN |
| Center for Building Communities | Notre Dame | South Bend | IN |
| Studio 804 | University of Kansas | Lawrence | KS |
| Kansas City Design Center | University of Kansas / Kansas State University | Kansas City | KS/MO |
| Center For Neighborhoods (home to Joint Urban Design Studio) | University of Kentucky / University of Louisville | Louisville | KY |
| Office of Community Design and Development (OCDD) | Louisiana State University | Baton Rouge | LA |
| Urban + Rural Community Design Research Center (U+R CDRC) | Southern University | Baton Rouge | LA |
| CITYbuild Consortium of Schools | Tulane University | New Orleans | LA |
| Tulane Regional Urban Design Center (TRUDC) | Tulane University | New Orleans | LA |
| Tulane City Center | Tulane University | New Orleans | LA |
| Community Design Resource Center of Boston | | Boston | MA |
| Neighborhood Design Center of Baltimore | | Baltimore | MD |
| Detroit Studio | Lawrence Technological University | Detroit | MI |
| Detroit Collaborative Design Center | University of Detroit Mercy | Detroit | MI |
| Metropolitan Design Center | University of Minnesota | Minneapolis | MN |
| Center for Rural Design | University of Minnesota | St. Paul | MN |
| Gulf Coast Community Design Studio | Mississippi State University | Biloxi | MS |
| Carl Small Town Center | Mississippi State University | Mississippi State | MS |
| Community Design Center | Montana State University | Bozeman | MT |
| Asheville Design Center | | Asheville | NC |
| Design Corps | | Raleigh | NC |
| Pratt Center for Community Development | Pratt Institute | Brooklyn | NY |
| Urban Design Project | University of Buffalo, State University of New York | Buffalo | NY |
| City College Architecture Center | City College - City University of New York | New York | NY |
| Hester Street Collaborative | | New York | NY |
| Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Design | Hunter College - City University of New York | New York | NY |
| Rochester Regional Community Design Center | | Rochester | NY |
| The Center for Community Design Research | SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry | Syracuse | NY |
| UPSTATE | Syracuse University | Syracuse | NY |
| Troy Architectural Project (TAP) | | Troy | NY |
| Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine | Miami University of Ohio | Cincinnati | OH |
| Community Design Center | University of Cincinnati | Cincinnati | OH |
| Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative | Kent State University | Cleveland | OH |
| Columbus Neighborhood Design Center | | Columbus | OH |
| BaSIC Initiative | Portland State University/University of Texas at Austin | Portland | OR |
| Community Design Collaborative | | Philadelphia | PA |
| Hamer Center for Community Design | Pennsylvania State University | University Park | PA |
| American Indian Housing Initiative (AIHI) | Pennsylvania State University / Chief Dull Knife College | State College/Morningstar | PA/MT |
| Community Research and Design Center | Clemson University | Clemson | SC |
| East Tennessee Community Design Center | | Knoxville | TN |
| Memphis Regional Design Center | | Memphis | TN |
| Nashville Civic Design Center | | Nashville | TN |
| Austin Community Design & Development Center | | Austin | TX |
| building/communityWORKSHOP | University of Texas Arlington | Dallas | TX |
| ASSIST, Inc. | | Salt Lake City | UT |
| DesignBuildBLUFF | | Park City | UT |
| Community Design Assistance Center | Virginia Polytechnic | Blacksburg | VA |
| Community Design Studio | | Christiansburg | VA |
| Vermont Design Institute | | Burlington | VT |
| Pomegranate Center | | Issaquah | WA |
| environmental WORKS | | Seattle | WA |
| Community Design Solutions | University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee | Milwaukee | WI |
| Community Design Team | West Virginia University | Morgantown | WV |

**(TABLE 1) 81 design centers included in analysis**

*Service assessment*
The authors and a research assistant reviewed the websites of the 81 centers in our sample to assess the nature and range of services offered. We first conducted a pilot assessment of the websites of fifteen community centers,[iv] assessing the textual content of the website as well as documentation of completed or in process projects and services provided by the center (e.g. PDF's or links to client websites). We coded and sorted these services into fourteen types and further grouped the service types into four broad categories: 1) planning and design, 2) research and consulting, 3) education and outreach, 4) other/community services. We then used the typology to analyze services provided by each of the 81 community design centers in our sample.[v]

Short descriptions of the four categories and fourteen service types follow.

*CATEGORY 1: Planning and design services:*

- Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Municipal and Regional
Definition: Planning, design and engagement efforts under contract to a municipality, regional planning entity or advocacy group at the municipal scale or larger.
Example: University of Arkansas Community Design Center *Monticello: Place-Based Codes and Plans for an Arkansas Delta Community*

- Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Single Stakeholder
Definition: Design and planning of sites owned or controlled by a single entity such as an urban lot, campus, unbuilt subdivision, school, or public park.
Example: Austin Community Design and Development Center, conceptual site designs for Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation's Guadalupe Saldana Subdivision.

- Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Multi Stakeholder
Definition: Design and planning of sites controlled by multiple owners, e.g. neighborhoods, downtowns, commercial corridors.
Example: University of Miami School of Architecture Center for Urban & Community Design, *Grand Avenue Vision Plan* for Miami's Coconut Grove neighborhood

- Architectural programming and concepts
Definition: Designs for structures and landscapes, without provision of construction-quality architectural documents, e.g. architectural concepts, programming schemes, draft designs, presentation drawings, zoning analysis and feasibility studies.
Example: Archeworks of Chicago, *Ideal Chicago Community School Prototype Designs* for the Chicago Public School System and the Chicago Campaign to Expand Community Schools

- Architectural Design: Finished Drawings
Definition: Finished architectural drawings for new buildings, interior renovations, adaptive re-use, small structures (e.g. retail and information kiosks) and landscapes.
Example: Design Corps of Raleigh, NC, designs of housing for migrant farm workers

- Design/Build or Construction Management
Definition: Design and construction of small to medium sized projects or construction management for larger projects built by commercial contractors.
Example: University of Kansas Studio 804, single-family housing construction

- Public Art, Signage, Graphic Design, Wayfinding
Definition: Public art plans and programs; design, creation and installation of public art and monuments; signage design; wayfinding and other related endeavors.
Example: The Donaghy Project for Urban Studies and Design at The University of Arkansas at Little Rock, *Visitor Signage Guidelines* for the city of Little Rock.

*CATEGORY 2: Research and consulting services:*

- Inventories and existing condition studies
Definition: Inventories or existing condition studies focused on urban areas such as land use surveys, as-built drawings, historic inventories, commercial censuses and demographic reports.
Example: Nashville Civic Design Center, *Northeast Nashville/ Dickerson Road Inventory*

- Building audits and repairs
Definition: Building audits including Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, building code compliance, energy efficiency and historic registry potential, as well as emergency home repair services.
Example: ASSIST, Inc of Salt Lake City, accessibility plan review for new housing

- Primary research and policy analysis
Definition: Primary research presented in the form of white papers, policy briefs and case studies.
Example: Arid Lands Institute, *Water, Climate Change, and Adaptation in the Arid American West: A Field Manual*

- Administrative assistance
Definition: Administrative or organizational assistance to other non-profit groups, particularly services such as grant writing, historic register applications, strategic planning and other kinds of organizational consulting.
Example: Kansas City Design Center, Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) grant proposal for the Quindaro Town Preservation Society

*CATEGORY 3: Education*

- Training and education
Definition: Symposia, lectures, exhibitions, classes and public awareness campaigns.
Example: Arizona State University's Stardust Center, public outreach and education campaign including brochures, a PowerPoint Presentation and speaker's bureau around the theme "Making Sustainable Communities Happen"

*CATEGORY 4: Other Community Services*

- Mapping and online data
Definition: Publicly available web-hosted GIS map portals or other inventories with data collected, aggregated or analyzed by design centers, and often focused on local issues.
Example: University of Cincinnati Community Design Center, Interactive Development Map with information on development and planning projects in the Uptown Cincinnati area

- Meeting space, libraries and computer labs

Definition: Community meeting space, libraries or computer labs available to the public or other non-profit groups for free or a small fee.
Example: Florida Community Design Center in Gainesville regional planning document archive

This method has some limitations. First, design centers must possess a functional, thorough and up-to-date website. Functioning centers without a website were automatically omitted from the research, while those without comprehensive archives may have been under-counted in the tabulations. The analysis relies on design centers' own terminology, which is not consistent across centers; for instance, documents called variously "charrette report," "plan," "design strategy," "study" or "vision document" often appeared to be essentially the same type of product. Some judgments had to be made in order to create a useful table of services offered; without grouping similar types of services together (e.g. design/build and construction management) the list became too unmanageably large, but this aggregation may have tilted the results of the analysis, with some of the categories being broader than others, and thus inherently capturing more centers within the category. Despite this, we feel the categories make a useful distinction among the different services offered, and based on our observations the tabular results represent a realistic snapshot of what we saw as we conducted the website analysis. Despite these limitations, the analysis offers a useful snapshot of the broad range of services offered by modern community design centers and we are not aware of any similar study that offers this kind of look broad inside current community design practice.

**Services offered by community design centers**  (N=81)

**Planning and design**
Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Single Stakeholder
Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Multi Stakeholder
Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Municipal and Regional
Architectural programming and concepts
Architectural Design: Finished Drawings
Design/Build or Construction Management
Public Art, Signage, Graphic Design, Wayfinding

**Research and consulting**
Primary research and policy analysis
Inventories and existing condition studies
Building audits and repairs
Administrative assistance

**Education**
Training and education

**Other: community services and outreach**
Mapping and online data
Meeting space, libraries and computer labs

(TABLE 2) Services offered by community design centers

ANALYSIS

Community design centers today use a broad range of approaches to address local needs. The 81 centers analyzed offered on average 5.25 (median = 5) of the service categories, but there is some variability, with some centers focusing on just one or two services while the center with the most extensive portfolio offered ten out of the fourteen types. Of the 14 service types identified, offerings break down into three clusters as shown in table 3.

**Community design centers:**
Primary, secondary, tertiary clusters of services

| **Primary cluster** | |
| --- | --- |
| Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Single Stakeholder | 84% |
| Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Multi Stakeholder | 74% |
| Architectural programming and concepts | 70% |
| Training and education | 53% |
| **Secondary cluster** | |
| Primary research and policy analysis | 41% |
| Design/Build or Construction Management | 36% |
| Architectural Design: Finished Drawings | 35% |
| Public Art, Signage, Graphic Design, Wayfinding | 35% |
| Inventories and existing condition studies | 26% |
| Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Municipal and Regional | 25% |
| Mapping and online data | 25% |
| **Tertiary cluster** | |
| Meeting space, libraries and computer labs | 10% |
| Building audits and repairs | 7% |
| Administrative assistance | 5% |

(TABLE 3)  Services offered by community design centers, ordered by frequency

Primary Cluster: Small area plans and conceptual designs, not surprisingly, represent the core of community design practice. Plans, strategies, designs, visions, and studies for small areas under unitary ownership are the most common type of service offered by the centers analyzed, with 84% providing this kind of service. Plans for small areas under multiple ownership follows closely (74% of centers). 70% of centers offer architectural programming and conceptual designs and 53% provide some kind of training or educational program.

Secondary Cluster: The next cluster of services includes five types of activities that are vastly more disparate than the first group, with such services offered by roughly one-quarter to slightly less than one-half of centers, including primary research and policy analysis (41%); design/build or construction management (36%); finished architectural designs (35%); public art, signage, graphic design and wayfinding (35%); inventories and existing condition studies (26%); mapping and online data (25%); and municipal and regional plans (25%).

Tertiary Cluster: Services in the final cluster are offered by ten percent of centers or less: meeting space, libraries and computer labs (10%); building audits (7%); and administrative assistance (5%).

*Differences between university affiliated and independent centers:*
While most of the 14 services were offered roughly proportionally by both university affiliated and standalone centers, four services were were disproportionally offered. Municipal and regional plans are undertaken by 25% of all design centers, but while 35% of university-affiliated centers have created these types of plans, only 4% of standalone centers have done so. University affiliated centers are also significantly more likely to conduct inventories and existing condition studies, provided by 26% of all centers and 31% of university centers but only 15% of standalone centers. Independent centers, however, are more likely to provide finished architectural drawings (54% versus 25% of university affiliated centers) and building audits (15% versus 4% of university affiliated centers) and training, education and outreach (65% versus 47% of university affiliated centers). A comparison of services provided by university affiliated and standalone centers is shown in table 4.

**Differences in types of services most commonly offered by university based and independent centers**

| University based community design cetners (N=55) | | Independent community design centers (N=26) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Primary Cluster** | | **Primary Cluster** | |
| Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Single Stakeholder | 82% | Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Single Stakeholder | 88% |
| Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Multi Stakeholder | 76% | Architectural programming and concepts | 77% |
| Architectural programming and concepts | 67% | Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Small Area / Multi Stakeholder | 69% |
| | | Training and education | 65% |
| | | Architectural Design: Finished Drawings | 54% |
| **Secondary Cluster** | | **Secondary Cluster** | |
| Training and education | 47% | Public Art, Signage, Graphic Design, Wayfinding | 38% |
| Primary research and policy analysis | 44% | Primary research and policy analysis | 35% |
| Design/Build or Construction Management | 38% | Design/Build or Construction Management | 31% |
| Public Art, Signage, Graphic Design, Wayfinding | 33% | | |
| Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Municipal and Regional | 35% | | |
| Inventories and existing condition studies | 31% | | |
| Mapping and online data | 27% | | |
| Architectural Design: Finished Drawings | 25% | | |
| **Tertiary Cluster** | | **Tertiary Cluster** | |
| Meeting space, libraries and computer labs | 9% | Mapping and online data | 19% |
| Building audits and repairs | 4% | Building audits and repairs | 15% |
| Administrative assistance | 4% | Inventories and existing condition studies | 15% |
| | | Meeting space, libraries and computer labs | 12% |
| | | Administrative assistance | 8% |
| | | Plans, Strategies, Designs, Visions, Studies: Municipal and Regional | 4% |

**(TABLE 4) Differences in types of services offered by university based and independent centers.**

Municipal and regional plans as well as the kinds of background studies associated with them may be more attractive to university-based centers because they dovetail with the university's public mission, and because universities can tap existing resources such as technology and large low-skilled labor pools (e.g. students conducting surveys for course credit). Independent centers, on the other hand, may have fewer of such resources available to them and also may have a more specific mission to work with marginalized populations rather than municipal governments. Likewise, inventories and existing condition reports may be viewed by independent centers as worthwhile projects only as part of a larger planning effort while university-affiliated centers may view them as pedagogically useful standalone exercises.

Independent centers, though, may be more likely to employ licensed architects as opposed to student architects and thus for reasons related to licensing and liability be better able to provide finished architectural drawings and building audits requiring extensive training. Independent centers are more likely to offer training, education and outreach services, perhaps because University affiliated centers have a separate teaching mission and thus do

not consider public education as part of their mission, or because their home departments already host their own speakers and symposia, thus allowing university affiliated centers to focus on other efforts.

*Age of design centers:*
Figure 1 illustrates the diversity in the make-up of design centers in terms of their age, range of services offered, and institutional affiliation. The average age of design centers for the 75 centers that listed such information on their website was 18.7 years. A majority of the first generation design centers (those founded in the 1960's and 1970's) still in existence are independent centers, though the two longest running centers in the survey – Pratt Center for Community Development (1963) and Ball State College of Architecture and Planning: Community Based Projects (1966) have university affiliations. The majority of centers, and the vast majority founded between 1985 and 2000, were affiliated with universities. Of the 25 independent centers still in operation for which founding dates were available, 40% began operations in 1985 or before; for university-affiliated centers, only 13% did.
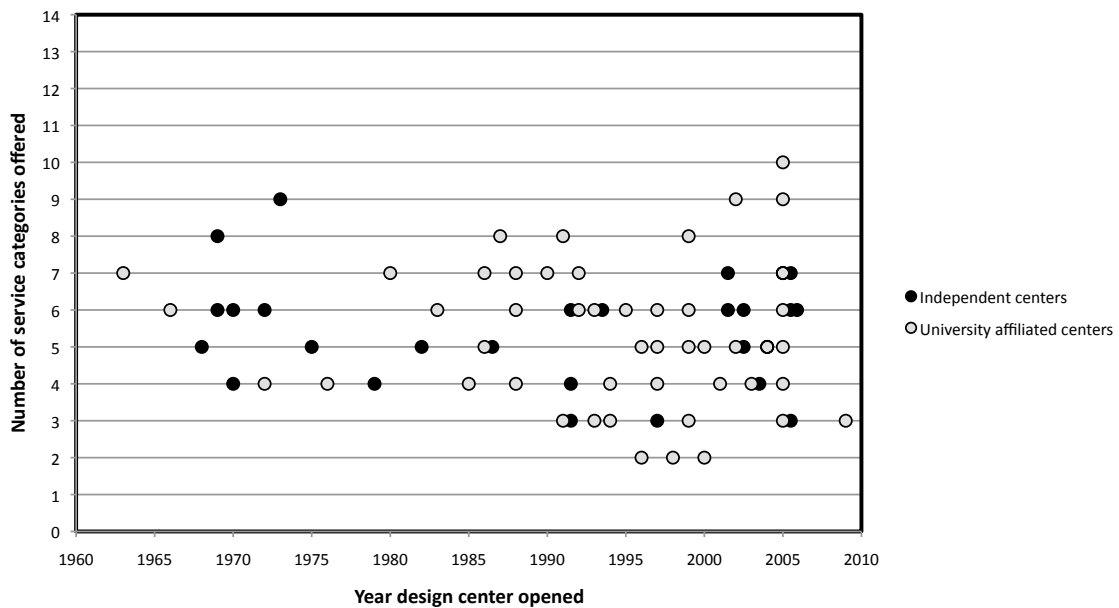


(FIGURE 1) Scatter plot of community design centers showing first year in operation and number of services offered.

As figure 1 also shows, there appears to have been a marked uptick in the founding of new centers in 2005. In that year, 12 new centers (8 university affiliated and 4 independent) were founded, comprising 16% of all design centers currently in operation. Only one center has been founded since 2005, The Center for Building Communities at Notre Dame University in 2009. Of the 12 centers founded in 2005, three are located in the Gulf Coast region of the United States, suggesting that hurricanes Katrina and Rita and their associated devastation prompted the founding of these centers. It is also possible, though, that these events also raised awareness for the need of community planning assistance (or the willingness to find it) in other locations around the country, leading to this surge in the

founding of new centers in 2005. Finally, as this figure shows, the age of design centers appears to have little bearing on the number of services they offer.

## COMMUNITY DESIGN IN PRACTICE

Community design centers, in addition to offering a variety of services to their communities, also take very different forms and have varied resources. This section provides overviews of two long-running community design centers to illustrate how different centers utilize the kinds of services inventoried above in ways appropriate to community needs and design center resources.

*Pratt Center for Community Development*
One of the oldest community-based design centers in the country, The Pratt Center for Community Development (PCCD) was established in 1963 in Brooklyn, New York as an outreach arm of the Pratt Institute's urban planning program. Early programs included a free "neighborhood college" program for working class residents, as well as studies of proposed development projects in the area. Still loosely affiliated with the Pratt Institute, the PCCD's focus has shifted multiple times since 1963. When the center was founded, disinvestment and entrenched poverty in its own Brooklyn neighborhood were the center's core concerns. By the late 1990's gentrification prompted the center to refocus on preventing residential displacement in a suddenly over-exuberant housing market. Over time the center has also become increasingly engaged in projects throughout New York City, including both project-based planning and community organizing work in local neighborhoods and municipal level policy analysis and advocacy.

Today, 13 full time staff members, 2 part-timers, plus student interns, work on design and development for low income housing and community-based business, community school planning and design assistance, neighborhood planning, policy analysis reports, green roof design, community sustainability plans, and smart energy outreach. Current and recent PCCD projects include an energy efficiency upgrade outreach initiative (Retrofit NYC), neighborhood plans (e.g. The Green Agenda for Jackson Heights), an online mapping project (the Transportation Equity Atlas), and policy reports such as *RenewableNY: Bringing Manufacturing Businesses the Power to Retrofit*.

*Yale Urban Design Workshop*
The Yale Urban Design Workshop (YUDW) was founded in 1992, and, despite its name, operates independently from Yale University, though it is headed by a Yale faculty member and employs students from the school's College of Architecture on a project-by-project basis. Much of the center's early work was based on the intersection of design and community development, such as a HUD funded partnership with New Haven's Dwight Neighborhood Development Corporation that led to designs for a neighborhood grocery store, a school addition, housing rehabilitation, and a daycare center. More recently the Dwight neighborhood and other clients have asked the YUDW to help create environmental sustainability strategies. Today, the YUDW is based in a storefront near the Yale campus, where its sole full time paid staff member coordinates all of the workshop's activities. The YUDW specializes in the kinds of projects that exhibit challenges or complications that might make them unsuitable or undesirable for private firms, including architectural designs for challenging sites, working with communities that are poorly organized, or working for cities at low cost on conceptual or visioning projects.

The YUDW has served as a design and planning consultant for 35 municipalities in Connecticut, as well as community development corporations, private developers, non-profit developers, chambers of commerce, and other local entities, including a redevelopment analysis for the Bethany, CT Airport; a concept plan for the Branford, CT town green and conceptual planning for a Naugatuck Valley Industrial Heritage Trail. Additionally, the YUDW increasingly works beyond its local context, designing a non-profit housing development in Harlem, New York City; a preservation and development study for Brasilia, Brazil; and facilitating a charrette to design a middle eastern Peace Park on an island in the Jordan River.

As these two examples illustrate, community design, and community design centers, can take many forms. While the Pratt center has a core staff of 13 and focuses largely on community-based work and policy advocacy, the Yale workshop relies on one full time staff member and has a much more design-centric focus. Yet, both centers are well known and respected in their regions, having been in operation for 50 and 21 years, respectively. The combination of context and available resources and assets largely shapes the set of services that design centers offer. Pratt's services are shaped in part by its location in a large urban center, with Yale in a much smaller city surrounded by many small towns and semi-rural villages. Similarly, the Pratt center draws on its activist history as well as the skillsets of faculty from the Pratt Institute, which offers degrees in planning, historic preservation, architecture and environmental systems management. Yale, conversely, relies almost exclusively on architecture faculty and students, and both its director and sole staffer are trained architects.

## CONCLUSION

Despite a broad range of services offered across the 81 community design centers analyzed, a core set of approaches are used by over two-thirds of all centers analyzed and are rooted in helping client/partners envision alternate futures for their local communities and empowering them to make desired changes themselves or through local advocacy. Whether providing conceptual designs and feasibility studies for building construction or renovation, redesigning neglected public spaces, planning for neighborhood revitalization or protecting valued community resources, this visionary aspect of community design remains central to the undertaking. The centrality of these approaches appears consistent with Comerio's findings, when she noted that by the mid-1980's many community designers had decided that, "their clients were best served by small do-able plans rather than by just, democratic, and unattainable ones," (Comerio 1984b, p. 53). The core group of services offered by today's community designers likewise appears to result in projects that are pragmatic and manageable in scale, using incremental and attainable goals as their benchmarks for success.

Yet, today's less commonly used approaches also represent some of the entrepreneurialism that Comerio advocated. Though used by a smaller percentage of centers these approaches might be appropriate only in specific contexts or require assets not available to all design centers. Comerio (1984b) mentions training and education programs, policy analysis, and design/build as approaches that were only emergent in 1984, but by 2011 all seem firmly entrenched in community design practice, albeit not part of the field's core approach. Additionally, cultural projects including public art, heritage tourism, wayfinding and related endeavors illustrate how community design continues to evolve and attempt to remain relevant and useful as the needs of community partners and clients change over time.

Finally, at least some of the services offered by centers may truly represent the entrepreneurial cutting edge of community design practice. Direct technical assistance such as grant writing, emergency repair services or organizational strategic planning, though only vaguely connected to what is traditionally thought of as planning and design, illustrate the holistic approach taken by some centers while engaging the broad skillsets of trained planners and designers. And, as community design centers face increasing constraints on grant and foundation funding, many American municipalities are experiencing severe budgetary constraints as well. While this may limit certain kinds of recurring funding for design centers such as CDBG funding, it may also generate a market for more fee-for-service work as municipalities seek cost-effective ways to procure design and planning services. Municipal comprehensive plans, programmatic plans, feasibility studies and other services for governmental and institutional clients, though not really part of community design's socially progressive purview in the early years, seem to be taking on increasing, if still modest, importance.

Community design, despite its roots in socially progressive, emancipatory notions of planning and design, has adapted over time. While issues like inclusion, social equity and community engagement still appear central to most of the centers' missions, clients of today's centers are no longer limited primarily to low-income communities, and may include small businesses, business improvement districts (BID's), and neighborhoods and municipalities of all income levels. In the current economic climate, centers appear to increasingly focus on small, attainable projects and fee-for-service work, while also seizing opportunities to make themselves more relevant in the face of service vacuums, especially at the municipal and regional level, serving as GIS clearinghouses, developing more sophisticated policy analysis capabilities, and branching out into areas such as cultural and arts planning, and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange through exhibitions, symposia, training and other services. This nuanced approach is rooted in community design's historical legacy but engages with the needs and realities of modern communities and is perhaps best summed up by The Center for Building Communities at Notre Dame University, who call their own approach "pragmatic but principled." (The Center for Building Communities, 2013).

In the quarter century since Comerio's "Big Design, Little Design, Community Design," community design practice appears to have embraced the kind of entrepreneurialism she advocated. Yet, observers such as Frank (2007) continue to point out the deficiencies of entrepreneurship training in planning and design education, with the dominant best practice models relevant to community design still rooted predominantly in service learning, participatory design and action research models (Toker and Toker 2006, Sanoff 2007). Perhaps related to this issue, young designers and planners who hope to use their technical skills to advance social equity may be philosophically uninterested or opposed to thinking of their work as a commodity, and thus have difficulty integrating entrepreneurship into their advocacy approaches. Social entrepreneurship research supports this observation, such as Thompson's (2002) study of UK non-profit groups which found a bias against entrepreneurial training and argued that, "only when the relevant entrepreneurs master the business element can they be successful social entrepreneurs. But many 'social' organizations are reluctant to think of themselves as businesses" (p. 428). Finding ways to think creatively about what community design is, and can be, and being unafraid to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset, while still maintaining a focus on the core values and historical precedents that define the field, are critical tasks for community design education and practice as it moves firmly into middle age.

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ENDNOTES

[i] The international architectural advocacy group Architecture for Humanity, for instance, was excluded; though they are certainly aligned with the goals of community design, they are a global network of local practitioners but do not themselves conduct applied work.

[ii] For a more detailed discussion of the distinctions among urban centers and their differing foci, see Forsyth (2006) and Dorgan (2006).

[iii] For a list of the 95 candidate entities omitted from the research, please contact the corresponding author.

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iv Upon completion of the list of 81 centers to be included in the analysis, a random number generator (www.randomizer.org) was used to select 15 centers for inclusion in this pilot phase. The list of 81 centers was, at this stage, still unsorted (i.e. centers were listed in the database and numbered according to the order in which they were added to the database).

v During this stage of the research we had planned to add types of services, reorganize our categories, and re-survey each of the 81 websites if we encountered a service that was distinctly different from the services identified in our pilot study. However, no such additional services were discovered and revision of our typology was not warranted. Our typology along with the prevalence of each service type within our sample is provided in Table 2.