

How To Design Together? - Community Architecture

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I can clearly remember it was somewhere above Montana when the realization struck me. As I looked outside the small airplane window I saw the giant chessboard patterns - manmade landmarks of agriculture that are unlike anywhere in Europe - highways that run for hundreds of kilometers without a single turn, the majestic Rockies and the Cascades... The United States which had always been a country too far away to be more than a distant world that I tried to imagine so many times based on my limited source of stereotypes one can learn from movies, books or urban legends...

And now it was all there, or rather I was all there - only an hour or two away from one of the best period of my life...

1. Introduction

The first time I heard about the Fulbright was in the final years of my architecture studies. A guest professor, *Terrence Curry AIA*, from New York City arrived through the program to our faculty offering special design classes in English. The possibility alone to learn something different and to practice the language was inviting enough for me to enroll, but I could soon realize I made an excellent decision. Gaining a whole new perspective of architecture I was also introduced to the method of community design - a relatively unexplored approach of shaping the environment in Hungary - that incorporates social justice, an advanced level of democracy and the excellence in design. Two years later when I was considering continuing my studies in the United States, the birthplace of the idea of community participation in design, the Fulbright - the most prestigious exchange program to America - was my obvious choice.

As one of the few lucky applicants I had the honor to be chosen for the 2007-2008 Student Research Grant.

2. Research program

2. 1. Community Design in the USA

Although the idea of participation in building and planning can be traced back to ancient societies community engagement in the built environment is of more recent origin. In the United States it was allied to the wider social protest movements of the mid to late 1960's. This strand was the advocacy planning approach where professionals represented poor communities in resistance to comprehensive redevelopment. In the 70's this approach was often based on *Community Design Centers* (CDCs) providing local-level technical assistance within communities on a number of issues, not only planning – a technique later used widely. (*AHRC Research, 2007.*)

Through CDCs, architects and planners have found creative ways to serve community organizations and distressed urban and rural regions throughout the country. CDCs have contributed to two new social empowerment goals: valuing neighborhood and community leadership as essential to lasting, useful social change, and creating alternative markets for investment. In addition to these CDCs also serve as advocates for social justice in an adversarial system of adjudication. (*Curry, 2004.*)

To a growing extent these depended on government funds – which started to flow from federal agencies such as the *Housing and Urban Development* agency (HUD). Major international organizations were founded to create opportunities for rigorous participation in the design and creation of public spaces and places, believing that it is the essential ingredient for successful environments. Rather than simply consulting the public, they created a platform for the community to participate and co-design new areas, providing insights, which independent design professionals such as architects or even local government planners may not have. Working with the public, property owner or builder it was easier to define a clear understanding of the users needs. A new pragmatic approach to participation has emerged, one that no longer views participation as defined by the categorical term for “citizen power”. The purposes of participation have been more modestly defined to include information exchange, resolving conflicts, and supplementing design and planning. (*Sanoff, 2000.*)

Participation reduces the feeling of anonymity and communicates to the user a greater degree of concern on the part of the management of administration. With it, residents are actively involved in the development process, there will be a better maintained physical environment, greater public spirit, more user satisfaction and significant financial changes. (*Becker, 1977.*)



Community participation, however, has a different meaning for different people and even a different meaning for the same people according to the situation; different users prefer to participate in different ways according to the situation too. Numerous definitions of participation can be found in the literature. Participation is contextual, it varies in type, level of intensity, extent, and frequency.

Community design and education have always been very closely connected terms. Organizations like the *Pratt Center* in New York, or the *Stardust Center for Affordable Homes and Families* or the *Center for Urban Pedagogy* do project based education programs in participatory design.

Community design methods include a wide range of special techniques. Design charrettes and workshops are the settings for many types of these. The term workshop means that citizens engage in experiences that also provide an opportunity for learning about human relations. A workshop is a planned series of events in which participants learn from each other as they explore issues and design criteria. An important component in the development of a workshop is that of building group cohesion. Opportunities should be provided for group members to become so involved with each other that they begin to see each other as persons and become interested in each other. (*Sanoff, 2000.*)

Design workshops can vary widely in topics, time lengths, and goals, and it is necessary that all three be carefully chosen. Participants attending workshops receive an information packet including the program and workshop schedule in advance. It is important that all decisions made are recorded and the working process is also well documented (photos, video or audio recording, meeting minutes). Community design workshops include different practical exercises that make it easier for participants to define design criteria and to give quality input even on technical aspects like site-analysis, design program, spatial relations, visual experience, and conceptual budget.

2. 2. Affordable Housing in California

The term Affordable Housing generally describes dwelling units - mostly rentals - that are affordable to those with a median household income. Although the methods to define affordability can be very complex, the most common approach is to consider the percentage of income that a household is spending on housing costs. In California this rate is 30%, meaning that a family with a median income shall not spend more than a third of the household income on the rental and the utility costs.

Shortage of affordable (a.k.a. Below Market Rate) units is very significant in the state especially in the metropolitan area of San Francisco. Since 1992, the city has created affordable housing laws to address the city's housing shortage and high costs. Fifteen to 20 percent of new units built by a developer must be rented to people who qualify for affordable housing. Numerous other policies of secondary market mechanisms, inclusionary zoning, and land banking as well as tax and fiscal policies that result in reducing the cost of mortgages and the cost of borrowing also have been introduced to address the problem. (*Melendez 2010.*)

The legislation however scared away developers from rental housing developments in favor of for-sale projects. Besides the shortage, the other major problem of affordable developments is design and building quality. In many cases the design of these buildings fails to respond to and to interact with the surrounding architecture of their neighborhood, providing cheap and unsatisfactory solutions for the median and low-income residents with a variety of special needs.



2. 3. Research Work at Pyatok Architects

Despite the multiple challenges that not only developers but also designers have to deal with, there are architecture firms who became committed to better quality affordable housing design and community participation in architecture. My mentor during the Fulbright program, *dr. Michael Pyatok* - professor of architecture at the UW in Seattle and founder of the *ASU Stardust Center* in Phoenix - has been engaged in community design for his whole career. He and his Oakland based architecture firm have developed an array of participatory design methods using easily understood graphics and models to help community design participants make well-informed decisions. Years of community work have developed the firm's ability to listen intently and respond sensitively.

With his professional guidance I had the possibility to join their work, participating in more than ten different projects in different design phases from early conceptual design to actual construction. The scope of projects included affordable housing projects in California and Arizona, urban planning program of a low-income neighborhood in Richmond and a new development in Kona, Hawaii, mixed-use developments, like a Native American Health Center and Housing in Oakland, and several other projects. These projects covered most phases of the community design workshop process too, thus providing an excellent opportunity to learn practical participatory techniques.

Probably the most interesting project was "*Nystrom Village*", a 400-unit development in Richmond, California that was to replace an existing 100-unit public housing block built during WWII for workers in the local shipyards. Located on four city blocks in a predominantly low-income neighborhood, the new community is planned to include affordable apartments for seniors, affordable rental family flats and townhouses, and homes for sale to first time buyers with a priority given to civil servants. Facilitated by us, architects, local residents and neighbors designed the

development using a participatory design process which allowed them to model a variety of solutions for both site layouts and home designs. In addition, the workshops helped the local residents redesign their neighborhood's streets to calm traffic, improve pedestrian safety and use landscape to enhance its overall character. The new residential development was coordinated with other neighborhood improvements, including a renovation of nearby park, the Nystrom Elementary School, and the Maritime History Center. Sustainability was a major component of this project, with a goal of achieving *LEED ND* and *Greenpoint Rated* standards.

My research work included two field studies. In Seattle, Dana Walker from UW gave a tour of recent community design projects in the area, and provided an insight on notable community initiatives of the past few years; while in Vancouver I also had a chance to meet Sandy Hirshen - professor and former director of UBC School of Architecture - who introduced me the planning policies, the architecture history and affordable housing projects of the city.

Part of my program was to participate on a community planning conference and workshop in New Orleans, where alternative solutions and methods for the post-Katrina housing situation were explored. With Prof. Pyatok we conducted a site-planning workshop exercise for participating city planners, giving an example of the various techniques available for community participatory development programs.

2. 4. Sustainable Architecture at U.C. Berkeley

While spending the dominant part of the semester with practical research at Pyatok, twice a week I attended lectures at the amazing U.C. Berkeley campus. Enrolled to a series of lectures in environmental architecture I had



the chance to meet such notable architects as Steven Hall or Glenn Murcutt and motivating young architects from all over the world; as well as to learn about experimental approach of sustainability, which is becoming the most pressing economic and design factor of the 21st century. As it was pointed out in different lectures during the semester thoughtful arrangement of spaces, carefully selected - sometimes unusual - building materials and solutions, revolutionary use of unexploited environmental friendly energy sources, smartly designed construction details, intelligent HVAC systems and recycling are essential components with which sustainability could be achieved easier than most would imagine.

3. A Hungarian in Berkeley – Personal Impressions

Arriving for the first time to the American continent one would expect a great amount of cultural shock. However, finding my place went much easier than expected. The international cuisine of Berkeley, the friendliness of the neighborhood and the people overall, the beautiful weather, the not less beautiful nature in and around The Bay Area all helped to settle down very quickly.

Adjusting to the Berkeley way of life meant a physically positive change in my daily routine. Instead of taking the BART I very soon started to cycle the 16 miles round trip from Berkeley to Oakland (learning how significantly motorists' approach to bikers can change only by crossing the city limits - at one place you are the hero who saves the environment, at the other you are prey.) An 'organic' change in my diet and regular hikes in the mountains also helped staying fit for my work and for the cultural and social life for which both Berkeley and San Francisco offered unlimited possibilities.

Being a Hungarian in California is far from a sensation, but it comes with certain benefits. Hungarians in the Bay have a great network with its center right in Berkeley. While networking mostly meant making friends with Americans, it felt always safe to have people around with whom I shared the same roots. The first big appreciation of my Hungarian descent happened right on the first week of my stay. Just as I found the perfect apartment, it turned out that the landlord's parents happened to be Hungarian immigrants. Although she herself did not speak the language, she was so impressed that she offered 50% discount of the rental price - if I can prove her in two weeks that even Hungarian cuisine can be healthy. With a handful kitchen tricks and the wide selection of organic products to be found on the farmers' markets, I finally managed to score enough gourmand points to earn probably the best place to live in Berkeley.

The San Francisco Bay Area - with its beauty, rich history and culture - provided endless source of sightings, however, one year seemed long enough for me to feel tempting

desire to explore places outside the Bay. The magnificent National Parks from Yosemite through the land of Giant Sequoias to the deserts of Joshua Tree, the Pacific coastline, or the volcanoes of the Southern Cascades provided the best setting for outdoor activities while visiting the City of Angels and the Wine Country supplemented to the holistic California experience.

Fulbright proved to be a key that opened doors to exceptional professional opportunities, helped me overcome many obstacles and challenges, and made it possible to belong to a highly respected international family - for all of which I will always be grateful.

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