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On Education, Pluralist Planning, New Institutions and Language

Public interview with Damon Rich (Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), New York) and Michael Rios (University of California, Davis)

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When we were doing the research on recent trends in community design we had great difficulties in finding current texts dealing with community design that were neither variations on how-to manuals or more or less merely descriptive accounts of the field of community designers' work. To us, it seems that there is a significant lack of critical analysis and self-reflection in the contemporary praxis of community design. Such an analysis would pay attention to the socio-political impact and conditions for community design, its possibilities, limitations and contradictions.

We could say that these days there are no programmatic texts like the one from Davidoff on "Advocacy Planning" from the mid-sixties, that try to conceptualize community design at a certain time, under certain conditions and with a specific goal, and thus could promote discussions of the current horizon of community design and its changing social relations, as well as the respective roles of planners and architects. However, in our view, the conceptual understanding and analytical assessment of the current state of community design are of central importance: without such an understanding of one's own entanglement there is no possibility of meaningful political action.

Michael, in this respect, your work is of great interest to us, as you draw a bow from the rather concrete and applied building projects you have been involved in to your current increasingly theoretical work that tries to conceptualize the practice

of community design. We are interested at first to know, how you relate the different aspects of community design – the practical ones, advisory activities, the theoretical discussion – to each other and how this relationship has changed since the past. Maybe you can also shortly trace your own personal development from the involvement in the Hamer Center at the Association for Community Design up to your more recent activities.

Michael: Underlying and also motivating my practice are these central questions: "What is an ethical form of practice and what is the role of the architect or planner in creating social change?" Both questions are probably somewhat unanswerable, but they become a benchmark to which we move in a certain trajectory, despite the contradictions and tensions that lie within the types of practices we do. These immanent questions are vital today when one considers that the twin agendas of neoliberalism and militarism override the public good and citizens' rights, engendering a crisis of the commons in contemporary society.

To put my personal journey in chronological sequence, after studying architecture and planning at Berkeley, California, I was shortly involved with the early beginnings of the New Urbanist movement which at least in case of the California version is less about neo-traditional historical approaches but looks at different types of urban form to address issues such as urban sprawl, environmental concerns, transit, affordable housing, and walkability. So for me these firms in San Francisco working in this field were sort of a consequential place to begin my practice with and to address – broadly speaking – some societal issues. But I quickly became cynical about that work, because there was an overemphasis on the form, which was not really responding back to the issue of ethics.

The question of what is our role in terms of addressing social issues more explicitly – not just assuming that the form itself will address social issues – was pretty much left out. So I quit that type of work and started volunteer work with NGOs in the San Francisco Bay area.

Could you give an example of these projects? How did they differ from New Urbanist approaches?

Michael: The first project I would like to present is a park project in Oakland, California that was completed in 2005, where I was part of a team that worked with a community of 50,000 people, primarily Latino and African American but there was also an Asian American community. This project revolved around organizing a community to get a 9-acre piece of land that was part of a former industrial site and to transform it into a waterfront park. We realized that this district in Oakland had the highest amount of youth living in the city with the least amount of parks and open spaces. So ultimately the framing of the question becomes the motivation for the type of project or intervention that drives all the decisions thereafter. The entire project took about 5 years. We organized a series of events and emphasized education as a component of that, which eventually led to some early design work. We used methodologies, like the idea of play, for making decisions that helped to engage people's perceptions about their own environments in a non-technocratic way. I was also involved in organizing a group of architects, landscape architects, university students and we created a conceptual plan that eventually got carried through by several San Francisco Bay-area firms.

The second project, which really carries that trajectory, is the redesign of a transit station in the Mission District of San Francisco where I was involved in organizing, again, a group of architects, landscape architects, and planners. It was a project with very different expectations about what that space was supposed to provide for that community. Gentrification was also a serious issue, pushing not only artists out but also a lot of the long-established minority groups. (fig. 13) This place was actually planned, or let's say managed by the police, as they were the de facto architects. Every time they perceived a problem they would in a sense militarize the space to enclose it and to preclude the public from using it, although their primary target was the homeless population. In a series of workshops, using a range of methodologies, we tried to create a public understanding

of what the key issues were, before making a decision about what interventions were appropriate in this particular setting. Some specific examples included focus group meetings with the homeless population using the site, advocates for universal accessibility, and local artists. In the workshops, we used three-dimensional models of the existing site as the basis for an interactive gaming exercise to program and design the space. The final project is called Plaza del Colibri, or Plaza of the Hummingbird, which has a historic association with migration from Mexico to California and Canada but also the symbol of this neighborhood being a central place for migrants early on – German Americans, Irish Americans, Mexican Americans and more recently Asian Americans.(fig. 14, 15)

Parallel to these practices you developed a theoretical approach to Community Design. Did the practical experiences in realizing these concrete projects influence your ideas about a more ethical practice of planning?

Michael: After I did this work I wanted to have the possibility to reflect on what this really means in terms of architectural practice and switched to a university setting, running a university-based Community Design Center for eight years. There, space for greater reflection was provided, not only about the methods and techniques of participative design but also concerning the question of the ethical form of practice – how much change is really being

generated by this type of work? I tried to evaluate this work beyond the assumption that this is all good work, trying to be more critical of the work itself. Rather recently I then moved to more theoretical aspects of spatial production questioning the role of architects therein but also searching for an ethical basis – a basis to use projects as vehicles to reconstitute social relations and then participate in larger social movements around change in the city.

This leads me to the question of what constitutes community design practice. I call community design a cooperative practice. It is in a sense very collaborative, it involves not just an individual, but many, and there is a lot of diversity and pluralism in the work. Although I am trained as an architect, planner, and most recently a geographer, I have assumed the role of a community organizer, art curator, manager, cost estimator, and evaluator. That's not unique; we do what we need to do for circumstantial purposes. Furthermore there is great variation in practice across scales, from more site specific interventions to engagement in issues of planning and design at the public policy level.

But there is also an operative side to the work that we do, it is intentional and it requires an amount of reflexivity to understand our relation to power. Do we leave open possibilities for the future in terms of new political projects or are our actions reinforcing existing social relations? To me those questions do require dialectic between the action of practice and the

reflection of the work, because there is neither a single solution nor is this discussion leading to an end, but is moving in a trajectory toward some notion of an ethical type of practice.

Damon, you are part of CUP, the New York-based Center for Urban Pedagogy. You initiate and participate in a lot of thematic exhibitions. Educational services and mediation are of central importance in your work, which is strongly influenced by and related to the field of art and cultural production. We were wondering how you conceptualize this approach and the variety of educational projects you conduct in relation to an understanding of architectural practice on the one hand and political work on the other. Do you see your work as activating people to become active themselves? As a service you offer to those lacking it?

Damon: To give an extended answer to your question, I will start about 25 years before I was born: One important historical framework for me – when it comes to the question of what community design is – is the demand for participation in state operations of planning. Going back to the late 1940s in the United States we had our first national law, known as Urban Renewal, which contrary to its bad reputation (which is in good part deserved) was actually the first law in the US that mandated that governments had to involve cit-



fig. 11) Poster for a Public Hearing



fig. 12) "PHTV: Public Housing Television", television show, New York 2004

izens in the planning of their living environments. A little bit later, in the early 1950s, we had some of the earliest participatory experiments on the local scale. In Manhattan for example, the first official community planning boards emerged, which were small segments of New York City divided up to facilitate locally generated responses to large scale planning. However, just simply putting the demand or the abstract structure in place doesn't necessarily solve the problem. So when I and a lot of my collaborators were students we became interested in the current status of these structures and started to attend some of these functions like public hearings that were set up to provide public participation.

What we experienced is that quite often almost no one showed up for those hearings. This was pretty interesting to see because to us, a public forum for the people to come and have their say was so theoretically exciting.(fig. 11) On the one hand it seemed like a failure and a lost opportunity, on the other hand however it seemed to pose very acutely the question of who the public was. This paralleled the critique of representation that had been undertaken by French philosophers during the 1960s which were en vogue when we were studying in the late 1990s.

Thus, at this point in time, perhaps more important than the question of whether there is participation is the question of the quality of that participation. How does it actually work? How can you actually go

through a public process that results in a physical proposal? All of CUP's projects are trying to investigate that question: How can you create high quality conditions for participation?

Well, then, how can you do it?

Damon: CUP started very much as a design collective, oftentimes working in an exhibition format.(fig. 21) Our interest in exhibitions was to take the space of the gallery as an opportunity to re-examine some of these pre-existing structures of participation. Apart from the day-to-day combat of politics, where you only stand up if a proposal affects your house or your block, the exhibition format is a way to take the documents of these political battles and look at them in a new context. The exhibitions were based on research and included materials on the city's building department, public hearings, and structures of representation.(fig. 17) We tried to develop modes of representation to understand the power dynamics surrounding planning issues and to refocus or re-contextualize these political questions and processes. In this respect the strategies from late 20th century artistic practices of institutional critique, from people like Hans Haacke or Martha Rosler, were very important to us.

For us, the notion of the public as a socially constituted thing, and that this can be a liberating and energizing notion, is central. So rather than saying that the public does not really mean anything, and that there is

no proper reference to what that word means, we focus on the notion of the public as a point where you can intervene.

This idea of the public is interesting to us. Maybe you could explain with some examples how you address the public in your projects. Especially the role of education seems crucial here.

Damon: More recently the course of the development of our organization has been about taking techniques and methodologies that we initially developed for our own work and trying to find ways that they may be useful for other people. I would like briefly touch on two areas where we have found some amount of success in spinning off these methodologies to serve a larger public: youth education programs and collaborations with community based organizations.

The education programs we undertake are both in-school and out-of-school programs, generally with students aged from 15 to 22. Our intention in teaching is not only to make students aware of design as a potential profession, but to use the tools of design as methods of investigation, as an opportunity to build civic engagement. We take the most basic operations that one learns as a designer and apply them to some very simple public questions. For example, when we were working with 4th graders, and even younger groups, we took a large abandoned Beaux Arts courthouse in the Bronx and asked the students to imagine what could this be? Nothing very complicated, just quick ideas: a homeless shelter, a dancing department, a rap factory, a Dominican house, and things like this. After they decided on that, we asked them the next question: What would it take to make that happen?(fig. 19, 20) We tried to frame this not so much as a design specialty but as something that in a democracy ideally would be part of all of our political lives.

For us, teaching is an extension of the practice we developed during the exhibitions: Identify a topic, for example the decision making structures around garbage in New York city (fig. 16), take bunch of students and ourselves, conduct interviews, visit site, then bring the collected material back to the studio and try to make different forms of representation to com-



fig. 13) "March of the Evicted", poster San Francisco 1999

communicate what we have learned. The second area I'd like to touch on is our collaborative work with community-based organizations and the attempt to find methodologies that can be useful to them. Most of the organizations that we work with are tenant organizations or environmental justice organizations. The latter started in the 1980s as an offshoot and critique of the mainstream environmental movement in the US and focus on the differential impacts of things like garbage dumps, wastewater treatment facilities, and toxic waste disposal facilities along race and class lines, how they affect people with less power.

In these projects we again use design tools to augment the capacities of these organizations. For example, we made a poster in association with the Metropolitan Council on Housing, who previously had a small totally packed handout listing renters' rights in New York City. What we did was simply to take some good old European/Swiss Modernist graphic design and make an attractive poster that fits on the back of a door, which we could sell in an exhibition to subsidize free distribution to organizations to use in their organizing.

Another project engaging housing is a television show called Public Housing Television.(fig. 12) Every year the public housing authority in New York is mandated by the federal government to have one public hearing where the people living in public housing apartments can come and give

their opinion about the next year's plan. This is a real challenge for advocates and organizers of public housing tenants, because the plan comes out around the first week in June and then the hearing is one month later. This means that the experts have only around 10 days to analyze this very bureaucratic plan in order to decide what they think are the most pressing issues, and to communicate that to as many people as possible, to get them to come and show the strength of the tenants at the meeting. In the video, which is shown on public access television and in living room screenings, we try to make these issues more transparent, more understandable, and therefore more open to demands for change from residents.

In our view there are a great deal of references and similar objectives between CUP's work and the practice of community design although CUP does not consider or label itself as a Community Design Center. Can you comment on CUP's development and work in relation to community design? If it is not community design, where do you see the reference (and also the target) for your practice?

Damon: Let me try to answer your question of how CUP relates to community design, or advocacy planning. First of all, CUP constitutes of a mixed team with peoples from different backgrounds, and of my major collaborator, Rosten Woo, who comes out of a policy and government background.

Yet seen from a more conceptual perspective the work we do comes from a critique of the notion of empowerment. Empowerment has been very much of a buzzword that can be traced back to the late 1960s, to the War on Poverty of the Johnson administration. It is related to an idea that the government or those in power can give their power away to people to use it. However, in practice, one learned that people usually only give away as much power to others as necessary for those others to pursue the goals of the ones who had the power in the first place.

So, one thing we try to do with CUP is to ask: "Is there another role?" rather than "We are the advocates of the people",

which also relates to critiques of representation given by writers like Gayatri Spivak, who examine the power dynamics and politics of representation, of the problem of speaking for people or giving voice to the voiceless. With CUP we make clear to our collaborators that we are neither here to give them power, nor to be their advocate, but that we think that the tools of design can be used to clarify the conditions in which they are operating. No matter if it is a legal, a political, or a financial structure – providing educational tools to groups already involved in political struggles would be a useful role for designers to play.

To illustrate that, I would like to mention another project that we've done recently. One of the great ideas that Germany gave to the US was Social Security, old age insurance. Recently there was a debate in the US about privatizing, or basically to a large degree of getting rid of that system. One of the main arguments against Social Security was the accusation that it is a stiff structure that would run out of money, go bankrupt, stop working, and that we therefore had to get rid of it. CUP produced a small publication that explained the basic mechanics of the system, how it works and how it is a very flexible system. Maybe that can be seen as empowerment, but a better version that scrupulously communicates all the aspects of the social processes.

CUP's work broadens and extends the practice of community design by introducing artistic working methods, cultural aspects and alternative ways of representation. Michael, you try to both extend and specify the possibilities and limitations of community and urban design through a more theoretical engagement with the topic. In this respect, we are very much interested in your classification of the different models of the interdependency of citizenship and urban design – the liberal, the communitarian and the pluralistic model – and their consequences for a critical architectural and planning practice.

Michael: I wanted to develop a critical perspective back into the field and thus tried to figure out what types of traditions



fig. 14) "Plaza del Colibri", San Francisco

community design borrows from. I wanted to analyze the relation between design practice and different models of democracy in the U.S. Historically, looking at political developments and the respective roles architects assume therein: What is the architect's role in a particular type of model in terms of the distribution or redistribution of social goods, place-making, or building cultural capacity?

One of them is the liberal model and I should clarify, we are not talking about the neoliberal model here, we are talking about the liberal tradition in the American form of democracy with its notion of the welfare state. This model focuses more on rational economic and distributive purposes, in terms of issues of public transit, allocation of public space, and those sorts of things. It comes from a particular political philosophy that is best represented in a John Rawlsian notion of justice. Accordingly, the way to achieve justice is through a rational way of distributing our social public goods – and that is a model that a lot of the early generation of community designers were advocating for, realizing that poor people had no resources and the wealthy had all. So the question thus is how do we use design as a way to redistribute those resources, those sorts of goods in the city, whether they are housing, parks, community gardens or anything similar. That model or type of practice is still implicit in a lot of community design work today.

The second model, the communitarian one, focuses on civic values and derives

from a civic republican notion that goes back to Alexis de Tocqueville and his observations of American culture. This tradition of design puts a stronger emphasis on the civic purpose of design and how visions of kinship can be materialized through design. So you have a move toward reinforcing the symbols and historic forms of the dominant culture, which is Anglo-American in the US, as well as to more contextual approaches to place-making and emphasis on the local. There is even diversity within the communitarian model of practice, where also New Urbanism quite fits.

The third model is less specific and has to do with the growing diversity within the field. It is a pluralistic model that begins to acknowledge a multiplicity of viewpoints. This pluralistic model aims to incorporate different and often conflicting viewpoints, and does not gloss over tensions, but looks at how different groups can begin to have a dialogue. A lot of this work is influenced by feminist political theory, and aims to move beyond representation, beyond having a seat at the table but towards the notion of recognition, of actual power.

Moreover, just as the discourse of empowerment has received critique, now consensus has been receiving critique as well, because there is no such thing. Again, if you assume that we live in a plural society, which manifests in the US along race, class and gender lines, and when you talk about integrating groups into decision-



fig. 15) Inauguration ceremony, "Plaza del Colibri"

making, whose culture are you integrating those groups into? The question then is whether your practice fosters an assimilationist's notion or if it really respects those new "third spaces", that move beyond the binary logic of dominant cultural values and minority voices.

In the work I do, I am always conscious of these issues because I think it gets closer to confronting power relations, closer to one's place in decision making and also challenges some of the dominant technocratic and bureaucratic discourse that is often used by government agencies. Implicitly, it also suggests that there is not a single aesthetic or single approach to this collective work, but one of multiplicity. It is really trying to broaden the horizons of design practice, whether it is about housing or the design of public space, but also begins to challenge the methodologies of participation. Understanding that communication and dialogue happen differently with different groups, leads to a valorization of those indigenous forms of communication, and finally to a richer and, in terms of moving to greater participation, far more democratic design.

Now, I am not suggesting that the liberal and communitarian models are irrelevant, but that the plural model begins to move design from an object focus to a process focus. Design becomes really a vehicle of our social practice to form new political communities that are not necessary part of the state. So the question is: how can we encourage, facilitate and organize

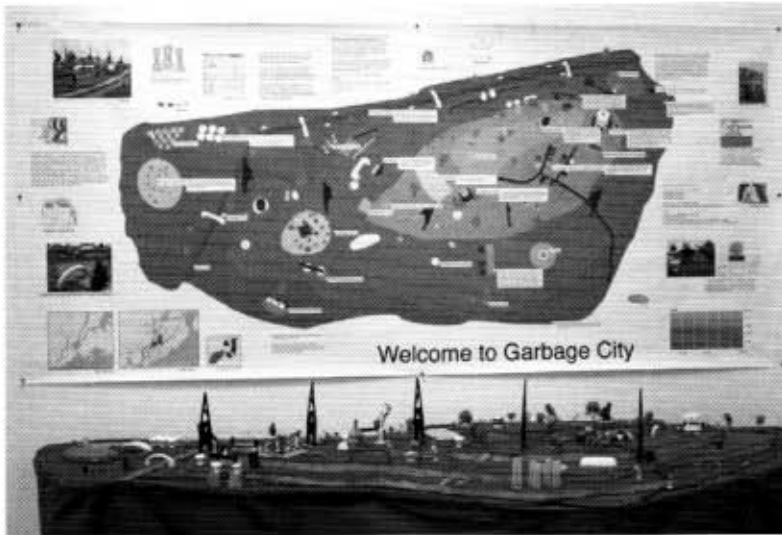


fig. 16) "Garbage Problems", educational poster and model on waste management in New York City, installation at apexart, New York 2002

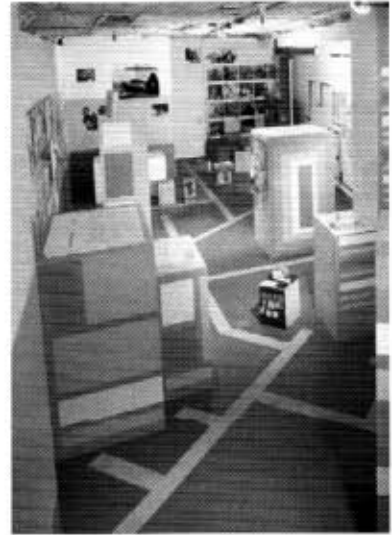
groups towards some collective action? Again, it's about a larger sphere of influence beyond architect and client. This instigates a larger philosophical question about the political role of architects, not in the sense of politicizing an issue, but politics in terms of how do we coexist and how do we order our coexistence as political communities?

While preparing the talk we came across the notion of "pluralistic action research". Can you tell us more about the idea behind that?

Michael: It comes out of a research tradition that began in the 1940s and 1950s, which is called 'participatory action research'. There is a whole history and influences from educators like Paolo Freire, which gets to the focus of Damon's work as well. It starts with a dialogue and, specifically, the use of methodologies to produce alternative spaces of discourse. To return to my opening statement about the crisis in contemporary society, I firmly believe that participatory action research challenges us to recognize the existence of "multiple publics", to borrow a term from Nancy Fraser, and to dispense with the myth of a unified, liberal public. Deeper engagement with communities reveals a public divided by gender, race, and class, and lead to the broader recognition of the limits of deliberative democracy as espoused by liberals and communitarians alike—despite the best intentions. For example, planning projects often

begin with state actors saying, "Well, this community, this neighborhood is in decay. We need to fix it up to do certain things." And then the architect steps in and has to respond to a problem that has been defined apriori. Participatory action research suggests that in this example, the architect would say "Is that the right question we should be asking?" and would then use participatory methods with community members to frame the appropriate types of questions, which then become the driving force for subsequent decision making.(fig. 18) Based on the training in most schools of architectural design, it is quite difficult for architects not to already create a vision in their mind rather than facilitate dialogue and to hopefully manifest the results of those dialogues through design. It requires questioning of some of the normative techniques that we use. Perhaps it's introducing a performative dimension of community design that is in line with a pluralistic notion of political communities. Not all techniques can fit with the specificity of situations that certain communities face. Multicentrism, agonistic democracy, and competing visions of the common good provide the basis for a wider, more inclusive, civic vision. Democratic design will require simultaneous creative engagement by a breadth of citizens, groups, and networks, including architects.

Whereas Michael refers – especially with the case study of the plaza renovation – to a direct involvement of



17) "The Programmable City", exh. on building codes, Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York 2001

the architect in the planning and construction process, we regard your work, Damon, as rather situated in an in-between position. "Educational services" is the first point on the list of your program areas, exhibitions and the production of media projects come next as you mentioned. Those projects seem to be primarily analytical and interpretative: learning to read the city, obtaining an understanding of its conditions, contradictions and functioning, changing its interpretation rather than changing the city itself. We would like to know how you connect the idea of a pluralistic, conflictual social practice with the idea of education and pedagogy and where do you see the limits of this pedagogical work?

Damon: In the beginning we were interested in the notion of pedagogy from two different directions. One was very straightforward; we were simply interested in education and explanation. One the other hand, we were interested in the pedagogical operation of material culture, how the designed world educates us. You begin to interpret what the world is telling you, you figure out how things that are even considered to be un-designed send messages to people, how they shape your understanding of yourself and your role in society, what the built environment tells you about how to act and how to relate to other people. Under the flag of "disjunctive pedagogy,"

we try to undo the damage of educational systems that promote easy syntheses and false unities. We like to make fun of practices like Model United Nations where everyone in the class divides up to play the role of a different country, spend a few hours arguing back and forth, and at the end everyone shakes hands and goes to the cafeteria for lunch. That always seemed like a very inadequate experience for preparing anyone to be involved in real politics. Because real politics doesn't have a neat conclusion like that and of course real politics involves a constant stream of contradictory messages. In day-to-day politics, you are oftentimes working while the rules are unfolding and changing, and we hope that our pedagogical methods help prepare learners for these tumultuous realities.

Michael, you are also searching for possibilities of evaluation of community design. What are your criteria to evaluate community design, and where do you aim at by establishing those qualifications? What could be possible topics and focal points of a future community work? What are dead ends and pitfalls (of being taken over for example) that should be avoided? And how can one escape them? How do you relate the practice of community design to the claims of a capitalist production of space? Any emancipatory concepts in sight?

Michael: The internal evaluation and cri-

tique of our own work is of central importance. When I did a survey of U.S. Community Design Centers – a lot of them are based at universities so you would expect that they are evaluating or at least getting someone to evaluate their work – out of the 60 or 70 that I looked at, including some non-university ones, only something like 16% said that they were evaluating their work. Well, this was a self-reporting survey instrument, so I bet the actual percentage is closer to 10%. What often happens when community design centers start is that they think they have come upon a new phenomenon. In some cases this may be true, but for the most part there is no need to reinvent the wheel. There is a lot to learn from our individual and collective experiences, both from the best practices but also from the really bad ones – not to repeat those mistakes. A critical analysis of our actions has to also deal with the quality and results of participation as community involvement is more than feeling good about the work we do, but also has to be questioned towards its way of functioning. For example, how can community involvement be directly tied to design proposals and strategies in an integral way?

Another concern is the pedagogical dimension: how are participatory forms of practice furthering learning in general? So, in a university setting, when I organize these projects with students, I also evaluate whether this type of work goes beyond providing a technical experience, but help those individuals to reflect on their roles

as future practitioners and the values that should be part of that work. At the same time, evaluation should not only concern student learning but also the individuals and collectives involved in these projects – “non-designers”-who are ultimately responsible for stewarding a project to its completion. This addresses at least two questions: how do projects facilitate individual and organizational capacity building, and how do projects as a form of advocacy shape regulatory and policy changes?

Let me give you an example: Looking at the quality of the participation and the redesign of the transit station in San Francisco I discussed earlier, the different groups – the police, the homeless, the residents, artists and transit users – initially were at each others throats. However during that project, by creating a comfortable space for dialogue and learning, they discovered the ability to advocate for one another. There was one resident who wanted to sweep the homeless away, but through the process she questioned her attitude and finally stood up, and she said: “I got involved with this project because I felt we had to take care of the homeless problem, but what I realize now, it's not their problem, it's our problem, and they have an equal right to use the space as much as we do.” This vouching for others was one measure of the quality of participation in that particular project, which then filtered up to future projects.

In that project we were modestly successful in terms of the connection between community involvement, understanding and physical changes to a particular site. But at the same time we were able to touch policy concerns and the regional distribution of resources around transit, which for over 20 years was skewed to predominantly white American suburban locations in the San Francisco Bay area. As a result of the project, participation became a new requirement for the renovation of transit facilities in the urban core. For me it becomes pretty clear. We have to link these modest interventions that we do as architects to larger policy matters at the urban, metropolitan, and even state, scales and, in the process, reflexively question the mutual exclusivity material interventions, capacity building, and policy change. That's where we can begin to



Fig. 18| Planning workshop, “Plaza del Colibrí”, San Francisco



fig. 19) Youth education program, New York

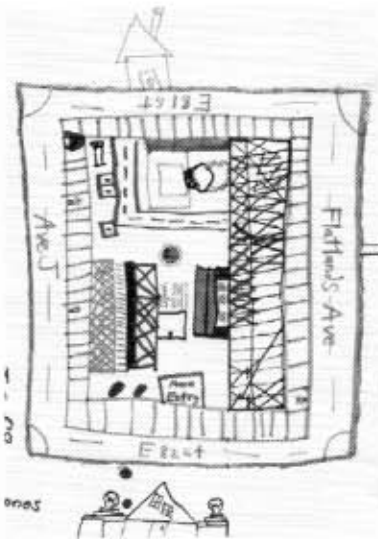


fig. 20) Youth education program, New York

connect up with other likeminded collectives around changing the use and the meaning of the city.

Damon, you recently started working for a municipal planning office. That is something that at least the older community design centers didn't do, they were starting as an opposition against exactly that: municipal planning authorities, urban renewal plans. You now became part of that former opponent. Can you tell us more about the motivations of this turn?

Damon: It has a parallel to the relation-

ship between community design and community development, even more clearly exemplified in the US by the rise of the Community Development Corporations. After the withdrawal of the federal government from planning in the early 1970s, many smaller organizations appeared, connected to specific communities but not necessarily representing these communities in their entirety. They were very much the lovechild of two intersecting dynamics: on the one hand the interest of the political right in retrenching and shrinking the government and the welfare state, and on the other side a certain aspect of the left that was interested in decentralization and local initiatives. In a lot of ways we still live in this era today, even though arguably it's hitting the end of its golden period of success. Mostly because the crisis of cities in the US resulted in a lot of vacant city-owned land that was then available to these Community Development Corporations for very cheap to do things like build housing, has now been used up, at least in cities where I work.

I feel very lucky to work with a group like CUP, first of all because of the enormous freedom of experimentation that we have. The fact that we are small scale, and maybe also because we never conceptualized ourselves as a community design center insofar as we don't even pretend to anyone that we are representing a community, gave us the freedom to do things that we hope are useful but without having to speak in anyone's name. Although we have grown during the last years and our budget will be something like one-quarter of a million dollars, which we're very proud of, we're still a small organization, especially in a city of 8 million people like New York City. With that in mind, my interest has been on one hand of course to be oppositional in a certain sense, to try to find better ways of doing things, to try to point out shortcomings in the official process. On the other hand we were not content with stopping with critique, but aimed to create new institutions. We are very much aware of the critique of institutions from people who came before us, and have benefited from it, but I think it makes sense to say that we are now very aware of certain power dynamics within institutions, whether it is the institution of advocacy planning or art or exhibition

spaces. With that in mind, my interest shifted towards the question of how to use that critical knowledge to build better institutions that incorporate these lessons. As for CUP, I was always interested in creating an organization that was sustainable and could be passed off to other people and become the work of others, and not just the personal project of a few people.

The city that I've just started working in about ten weeks ago is Newark, New Jersey. It is located right outside of New York City, about 20 minutes by train, a much smaller city than NY, around 280.000 people, but still the largest city in the state of New Jersey. Due to the crisis of the cities that I referred to before, US cities are heavily stigmatized along class and race lines, and Newark still bears that mark, in both positive and negative ways. By positive and negative I mean: you have a county, which is the larger structure, the county that we're in – without Newark – is 95% white, with a median annual income of about \$78,000. If you look at Newark, we're 82% Black and Latino, and we have a median income of \$30,000. In many ways it represents all of the issues of American cities, so for me it's a place to take some of the things that I have learned through the experiments of CUP, and try to apply them at a larger scale, not from the margin, where you are a voice of critique, or a voice of an alternative, but from the center. Often critical people tend to be apologetic for having certain kinds of privileges – being a white person or a rich person – yet I think it is shortsighted to simply hide and disavow these things. Doing this has a lot to do with trying to disavow one's complicity with larger structures, so at least for now, I'm very interested in trying to use that complicity to try something new.

Michael: I wanted to underscore what Damon just said. I think one of the biggest challenges we face right now – and it's not just about community design, but also about community development, not only cities but rural areas – is how do we begin to build new coalitions and institutional structures that are a departure from the current ones, that expose the limits of current forms of governance. Then it also begs the question: what are the roles of citizens and citizen participation? Who are

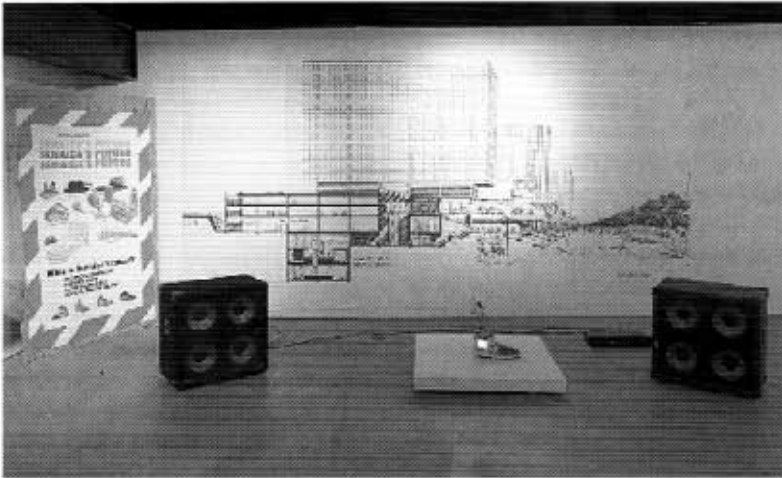


fig. 21) Big up, Jamaica! installation in the Sneaker Mart at the Gertz Mall, New York 2004

the citizens in building those institutional structures? It gets to the core of both an opportunity and a challenge, it doesn't mean that we have to assume one identity, but identify the gaps and create new spaces for discourse at multiple levels.

Talking about new institutions, we would like to know who pays for your projects. Where does the money come from? And does the question of funding affect your practice?

Michael: Every project has different types of resources that go into the project, both formal and informal. There are instances where there is no money, a lot of hope, and even more sweat equity. There are other instances where it's knowing there are state sources of funding, that we have to position ourselves technically to justify spending state money on our projects as opposed to somebody else's projects. So it's public money, private money, it's far more blending, it's hybrid, not an ideological purity. I would even go as far as to say it is an expression of American pragmatism.

To give you some examples: sometimes I'm serving in the role of advocate when there are no resources. In the park project I described earlier, there was a grant from a foundation to support urban parks which helped fund several community organizers and youth to participate in the project. The completed project was going to cost \$9 million, so that grant wasn't going to stretch that far. So we were strategic enough to realize that we had to frame

the discourse around the project to resonate at multiple juridical scales, the city, the state, etc. We were able to, in one instance, use the park project to demonstrate to politicians that this was important, and we had partners, non-profits, that were identifying politicians at the state level, who were going to support the acquisition of land for a park and public open space. We tied these two strategies together such that the then California Speaker of the House legislature, Antonio Vilaragosa, who's now the Mayor of Los Angeles, announced a statewide voter bond measure to fund parks at the site of our project. We positioned the project to then receive the funding when the citizens of California voted yes to the measure.

Damon: The budget that CUP works with is half from grants, which includes federal and state grants, generally for arts, and also private foundations, generally under categories like community development or citizen engagement. Then we get 40% of our money from contracts, like when we are providing a service to a school or a community based organization, and they are paying us – although of course that money has its own sources. Finally, about 10% of our money comes from private contributions; we have a party, and people come and pay \$15.

Whether it is regarded as appeasement or not, one has to be scrupulous in keeping these relationships visible. But since none of us is independently wealthy and able to be autonomous in that way, we need this funding. We certainly debate within CUP where we should pursue it, what is going

to best serve our purposes with the least amount of strange entanglements. But it's true, every non-profit faces situations where you have a funder who is like: "Listen, I'm willing to fund this program, but what would you think about doing this little thing too?" That is why you need to be clear on your guiding principles; so that you actually have a basis to decide if that is a diversion or a compromise from your mission or something that is worthwhile to do.

The projects of both of you are based on a local level involving minority groups and communities of different origins. So there is probably not only a problem of the expert language of the planners that might not be understood by the community, but also the very concrete question of which language do people understand and speak? We can imagine that language becomes a crucial tool in addressing people. How do you deal with this?

Michael: I would say that language is part of a larger set of cultural repertoires. I participated in the redesign of a park in East Oakland where there was a significant immigrant Vietnamese population. So in addition to creating outreach flyers in English and Spanish, flyers were translated into Vietnamese. The result was that Spanish participants came to the meeting, English speaking participants came, but the Vietnamese group was not well represented. So, we were wondering what was going on here. Afterwards I spoke to a Vietnamese person from the neighborhood, which really opened up my eyes and made me understand how this group of people was socially organized in the restaurants that occupy that particular neighborhood. She told me that there was an informal social hierarchy in the community and we first had to meet with some of the 'gatekeepers' to get their blessing in order for the rest of the community to participate. Once we did that, the Vietnamese population showed up to the next meeting. It is really important to find cultural allies, facilitators, and even 'translators' so that one does not make biased assumptions about interest in a particular project, how a group uses a space, etc. And start there and design a process around that organic form of culture in a particular

place as opposed to superimposing our own norms of how to make decisions, design space, and so forth.

Damon: I think it makes a lot of sense in terms of taking the time to study existing social structures. Sometimes one may assume that you can communicate directly with people through posting a flyer or something like that, but to really engage people it requires understanding existing power structures within the community. These structures of course always exist even in the most marginalized groups that you might imagine. This does not necessarily mean accepting that power structure as it is, but it does mean working with and accommodating it. You somehow have to have a critical intimacy with it, rather than trying to circumvent it through other means.

How do you define yourself as an expert in planning questions towards non-experts, e.g. the school kids or your community partners?

Damon: Of course you can have the very best intentions not to be seen as the expert, but especially if you are working across class or race lines or lines of educational level, being regarded as the expert is often difficult to avoid. In my experience there is not one answer for defusing that situation or undoing it, but there are many tactics that you can try. I've always felt that working through art or architecture, about the built environment, gives you a great beginning. For example, if I teach a class in a majority black neighborhood it gives me the chance to say that I am just a strange white guy that came here for the first time today, I don't know anything about this place at all, so people have to tell me. I'm not saying that this necessarily accomplishes the goal but it starts an exchange and the hard work of making those power dynamics clear. I don't think that power goes away if you ignore it. It's more about making it visible and allowing a group to actually talk about it and perhaps find a way to deal with it.

Michael: I want to add, that once you get to that point of mutual understanding, a dialogue about the different expectations has to start. When people come to the meetings or workshops to make a decision about streetscape improvements, for

example, often we too quickly assume that all participants are there for the same reason. But that's not always the case. You have to identify the different motivations and goals and then foster a process to collectively define what the rules of the game are. And if someone does not want to follow these collective rules then he or she has the right not to participate; and that's ok too.

Yet one strategy in this process has to be to educate elected officials, bring them to those meetings so that they listen for a change. And when that strategy doesn't work there's nothing wrong with good old collective action to organize communities and elites across the spectrum to realize your demands. That's what it often comes down to.

Damon: Sure, that is also my new position in the city. There are some very well organized groups in New York. In fact, the absence of any organized city planning for a quarter of a century has meant that any planning that has gotten done has been done by community-based organizations. It means when there is something happening that they don't like, they bring their people on the bus to the meeting to yell and scream. Because that's the only way we're going to be kept honest about what we are doing.

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