COMMUNITY DESIGN (RE)EXAMINED

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ABSTRACT

Participatory community design has matured to a point where more critical examination is needed for further advancement of this important area of design practice. As community designers, we need to find more rigorous ways to document and critique our work. Furthermore, we need to be able to look across projects and methods to develop a more shared language and comparative way of working especially in the context of more global practice. The case study method is one way for community design to further establish itself as part of mainstream professional design practice. This paper briefly reviews recent advances in community design and some of its most common and closely held beliefs. It argues for a more research-based approach to our work based on looking at projects and core values based on a common set of questions and criteria. A framework for thinking more critically about what we do and being more systematic in looking at the results and impacts of our projects is suggested. A case study method is proposed for ongoing evaluation and improvement of community design projects, issues, methods, and teaching. This is based on recent work commissioned as part of the Landscape Architecture Foundation's "Case Study Initiative in Land and Community Design" (Francis 2001, 2003). Developed specifically for landscape architecture, the method may have value for design and planning projects involving user and community participation. The goal is to adapt this method to help advance theory development, practice, and teaching in democratic design.

INTRODUCTION

Significant progress has been made in the area of professional practice now commonly know as community design.[1] There are clear signs that community design has established itself as a forceful and mainstream part of environmental design (Bell, 2003; Dean, 2002). Interest in this area of practice among environmental designers and the public has been increasing and there is a need for more dissemination of the results of community design. A strong network now exists of people working internationally.[2] Community design has also become institutionalized in many schools of architecture, planning and landscape architecture.[3]
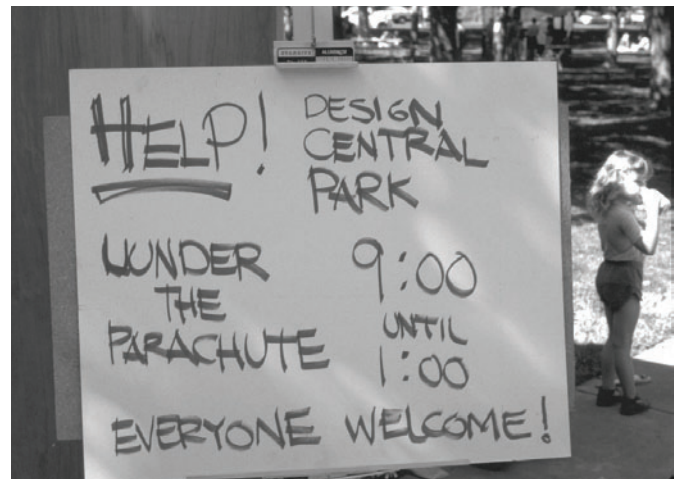

Figure 1. Community design has developed into a lively and mainstream form of environmental design practice.

Changes in community and public life are forcing a rethinking of more traditional design activity (Oldenburg, 1989; Putnam, 2001; Brill, 2002). The social and environmental problems of our time demand a more thoughtful and proactive approach to community design (MacCannell, 1993). This is required due to changes in social structure and public life and globalization of everyday life (Carr et. al., 1992). The movement toward more democratic and participatory design has been enlivened by recent popular debates on design, architecture and ecology including global warming, smart growth, new urbanism and post world September 11, 2001. The events of 9-11 have led to an interest in more participatory architecture. Community input into architecture and urban design has become almost a daily feature in The New York Times after September 11, 2001. While some may see this as a more fashionable and less democratic form of city design, we need to pay better attention to these larger social movements as they can inform and redirect our work in new and positive ways.

The values of community design have also found themselves in new paradigms of design and planning practice including "activist practice" (Feldman, 2003), the "reflective practitioner" (Schon, 1983), the "deliberative practitioner" (Forester, 1999) and "proactive practice" (Francis, 1999). While the titles vary, they share a common of approach of design and planning practice based on reflection, empowerment, participation, vision and activism (Dean 2002).

Critical Reflection in a Global Context

Community design is well suited for critical reflection.[4] Historically community designers have been among the most reflective and critical minded of design practitioners.[5] Yet there is an ongoing need for more systematic ways to know what works and does not work in community design, especially across countries and cultures.

Figure 2. Central Park in New York City has been the subject of many case studies.

Several useful guides for knowledge development and application can be found in environmental design research. One example is recent studies of the relationship between health and the built and natural environment (Frank et. al., 2003; Jackson et. al., 2001; Torres et. al., 2001). The participation of children and youth in shaping the designed environment also serves as a useful model for community design evaluation (Hart, 1997; Owens, 1988; Francis and Lorenzo, 2002). Studies of new urbanism (Calthorpe, 1993; Kelbaugh, 1997), regional planning (Calthorpe and Fulton, 2001; Thayer, 2003) and community-based place history (Hayden, 1995) and design (Hou and Rios, 2003) also are useful evaluation prototypes.

The case study method is a useful way to organize ongoing studies on the importance and impact of community design. Case studies are the primary way that community designers tell their stories and pass them on to other practitioners, clients and students. Case studies are often used to describe a project or process. They can also be used to critically evaluate the success and failure of projects as we often learn more through our failures than our successes.

Figure 3. Seaside, Florida is an example of a community design project that been documented as a case study and compared with others such as Sea Ranch in Northern California.

Case studies can also explain or even develop new theory. Case studies are a way to build a body of criticism and critical theory and to disseminate project results more broadly. They also can integrate best practices into a comprehensive and coherent body of practice and theory.

The Case Study Method

A case study is a well-documented and systematic examination of the process decision-making and outcomes of a project, which is undertaken for the purpose of informing future practice, policy, theory, and/or education (Francis 2001).

The case study method has great potential in informing and advancing practice and education in community design. Case studies often serve to make concrete what are often generalizations or purely anecdotal information about projects and processes. They also bring to light exemplary projects and concepts worthy of replication. For community design practitioners, they can be a source of practical information on potential solutions to difficult problems. For professional education, case studies are an effective way to teach by example, to learn problem-solving skills, and to develop useful evaluation strategies.

I recently developed a case study method for landscape architecture that may also have value for community design (Francis, 2001, 2003). Commissioned by the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF), the method uses a common format and template for case studies. LAF has developed a broad "Case Studies in Land and Community Design Initiative" to develop a more critical mass of cases useful for practice and education that allows for more analysis across cases. The method is being used in several landscape architecture programs in lecture and seminar courses and is now required as the format for student thesis work at some schools.

The case study method was reportedly first used as a teaching tool at Harvard Law School in 1870 by then Dean Christopher Langdell (Garvin, 2003). It has since become the standard method of teaching and research in many professions such as business, law, medicine and engineering. Case studies are also now commonly used in science education, the arts and humanities and public policy. There is currently a large and useful literature on how to develop and apply cases (Yin, 1993, 1994; Stake, 1995), using cases in teaching (Barnes et. al., 1994), and how to evaluate the effectiveness of cases (Lundeberg et. al., 2000). The case study method is similar to the post occupancy evaluation (POE) method used in environmental design research but differs from POEs as it is focused more on design process and practice.

The design professions have been slower to adopt the case study method, but there are encouraging signs it is becoming more of a core teaching method in architecture, planning, ur-

Figure 4. The health benefits of community gardens has been well documented.

ban design and landscape architecture. Recently it has found its way more into environmental design education, research and publications. Many designers and design researchers now conduct or present their work in terms of "case studies." Case studies are continuing to be part of teaching and research in environmental design (Spirn 1999; Hester 1990). Presentations at American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the American Institute of Architects (AIA), Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) and the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA) often have "case study" as their focus. One continuing limitation is that many of these cases are descriptive in nature and lack a critical or evaluative dimension.

Case studies can be utilized to develop several kinds of information for design practice. For example, they can test design assumptions against the actual built results. In addition they can inform design patterns that could or should not be used in future projects. While much of the information generated during a case study may be unique to the given project and its context, cases are useful for advancing knowledge in the profession in general. The elements that a full case study should include are: baseline information; the roles of key participants; financial aspects; process; problem definition and response; goals; program; design; site visit(s); use; maintenance and management; and perception and meaning. Additional critical dimensions to include in a case study are: scale; time; unique constraints; community and cultural impacts of the project; environmental sensitivity and impact; impact on the profession; infrastructure impacts; lessons learned and theory. In addition, it is useful to examine outside critiques, reports of the projects in the popular media, and peer reviews in the form of awards and honors. These dimensions are discussed in further detail in Table 1.

Case study analysis typically involves designing the case study, conducting the case study, analyzing the results, and disseminating the results. Case studies can be done alone or together to compare across projects (Yin, 1994). Case studies in community design can be organized around the type of project, the problem, the geographical region, or the designer. Each has its own unique purpose and benefits. Information for case studies can be gathered in a variety of ways. It is impor-

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Abstract/Fact Sheet

Photo(s)
Project background
Project significance and impact
Lessons learned
Contacts
Keywords

Full Case Study

Project name
Location
Date designed/planned
Construction completed
Cost
Size
Community Designer(s)
Client
Consultants

Managed by
Context
Site analysis
Project background and history
Genesis of project
Design, development, participatory
    and decision-making processes
Role of community designer(s)
Program elements
Maintenance and management
Photograph(s)
Site/Context plans to scale
User/use analysis
Peer reviews
Criticism
Significance and uniqueness of the
    project
Limitations
General features and lessons
Future issues/plans

Bibliography of project citations/related
    references
Web sites/links
Contacts for further information.

In-depth Analysis

Archival research (e.g., project re-
    cords, newspaper articles, etc.)
Awards or special recognition for the
    project
Copies of articles or reports on the
    project
Interviews with client
Interviews with managers and mainte-
    nance people
Interviews with users
Interviews with non-users
Longitudinal studies of the place over
    time

Table 1. A suggested format for case studies in community design.

tant to be systematic and consistent in using these methods. Most successful case studies incorporate a variety of methods such as site visits; site analysis; historical analysis; design process analysis; behavioral analysis; interviews with designer(s), developer(s), manager(s), and public officials; interviews with users and non-users; archival material searches including project files, newspaper articles, public records; bibliographic searches; and internet searches.

CASE STUDIES FOR COMMUNITY DESIGN

At least four types of case studies are useful for community design. They include place or project specific cases, studies of community design methods, issue case studies that cut across several projects or places and case studies for teaching community design. They are discussed in more detail in Table 2.

Place-based

Most community design case studies have been developed of specific projects. For example, past cases include studies of community-based projects including parks, playgrounds, and neighborhoods. There is a need for a larger array of community design project case studies. One recent example of a place-based case study is Village Homes in Davis California, which shows how the case study method can be used to evaluate an entire community (Francis, 2003). Challenges in developing this case study included fully documenting the designers goals in the project and testing them against residents experience of living in the neighborhood. It was also difficult to fully assess the economic impacts of the project. Yet it was useful to examine why this largely successful example of neighborhood design has not been replicated elsewhere.

Method-based

A fewer number of studies have been conducted of the methods typically used in community design. For example, the workshop method is a common and even sacred method used in community based design and planning. Yet rarely has it been described or evaluated.[6] Other methods in need of case study evaluation include scored walks, mapping exercises, surveys and web-based methods. It would be especially useful to examine these in combination.

Issue-based

There are many issues that typically face community design projects. These include power relationships between participants, how projects are initiated, and the difference between local versus expert knowledge in community design. In addition, the impact of participation on project quality and participants needs to be examined in more detail. The resulting form and aesthetics of built projects also need to be studied.

Place-based

Identify types of projects to evaluate in different countries – need New urbanist projects
Public spaces in community development
Integration rather than separation of design, technology, ecology and community

Issue-based

Develop community design typologies
Test assumption that participation creates more humane environments
How does community design empower participants
Do community design projects result in distinctly different aesthetics than traditional design

Method-based

Describe and evaluate the workshop technique
Asses methods such as scored walks, surveys and interviews, etc.
How much does community design cost as compared to traditional practice

Teaching-based

Develop studio based projects that can be used in different schools
Develop both real and hypothetical teaching cases
New forms of practice including "proactive practice"

Table 2. Types of case studies needed for community design.

Figure 5. Village Homes in Davis, California has been extensively documented as a case study.

Figure 6. The workshop method is in critical need of documentation and evaluation.

Teaching-based

Community design continues to be an expanding part of environmental design education. This is evidenced by the large number of community design centers attached to schools of architecture, landscape architecture and planning. As community service continues to be a focus of public universities, engaging design faculty and students in community projects will be popular. We need to develop cases both real and hypothetical to aid in the training of community designers. These can include teaching cases that can be used in different school and locations to compare results and impacts.

Community Design Reexamined

The case study method provides an opportunity to advance the state of the art of community design. It is particularly helpful in examining practice and its impact on community and public life.

Figure 7. Children's access and use of the environment is an example of research that can benefit design practice.
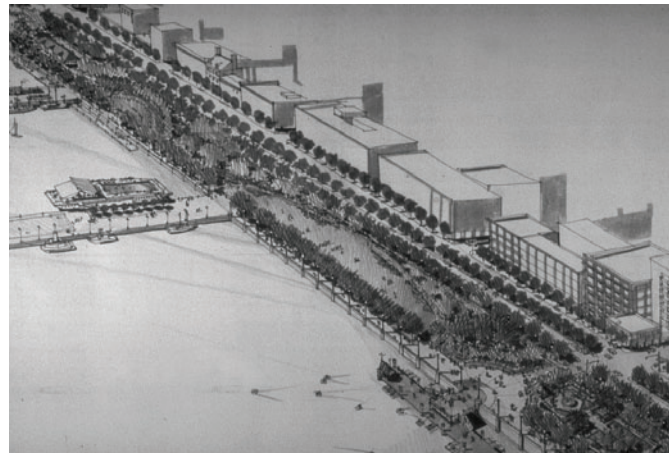

Figure 8. Both large and small-scale projects need to be documented and evaluated such as the Hudson River Parkway in Manhattan. (Source: Carr, Lynch and Sandell)

Even more importantly, case studies can force a reexamination of the core assumptions and values in community design.

We also will need to find ways to build case study analysis into everyday practice. A critical mass of case studies is needed in community design. These can include cases of specific projects or places, issues that cut across places, methods commonly used in practice, and cases that can be used in teaching environmental design in undergraduate and graduate programs.

There are some challenges facing the development of future case studies in community design. Issues include who does the case study, how is feedback made to participants, and the need for redesign of projects based on case studies. A chronic problem for community designers is finding the time to organize the information for case studies. Community designers are often too busy doing it to reflect on what they do or examine the impact of their projects. Also who pays for community design studies? We need to find ways to build evaluation into the fee structure of community design projects as well as find new funding sources for preparing cases.

Case studies offer great promise for community design. They will help this realm of practice develop and mature. Community designers need to work together to define and refine the dimensions they want included in cases and use this method as a core way of working.

ENDNOTES

[1] My purpose here is not to offer a full review of the area of community design. There are several reviews that provide more complete historical (Sanoff 2000; Francis 1983) and contemporary overviews of community design (Bell 2003; Comerio 1983; Hester 1999).

[2] There are several organizations and informal networks committed to advancing research and practice in community design. These include The Planners Network, the Association for Community Design, and

the Participation Network within the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) (See websites at end). Reflective meetings such as these Pacific Rim meetings, and seminars at annual meetings of the AIA, CELA, ACSA, etc. are providing a useful way to examine issues across projects.

[3] The experience of Community Design Centers has been well documented (see for example Blake 2003; Cary 2000) and comprises a strong network organized by the Association of Community Design (see useful websites). Community design as a part of environmental design education has also been widely surveyed (Forsyth et. al. 2000).

[4] A group of us developed a critical framework for community participation to aid research and evaluation (Cashdan et. al. 1979). Dimensions we identified as critical included genesis of project, role of the professional, and the quality of built results. It is useful to identify on a continuing basis the core criteria and questions we use to assess community design.

[5] Some suggest that community designers may have been too critical in their work at the risk of not being forceful or proactive enough about advancing their own design solutions (Hester 1999; Francis 1999).

[6] An exception is the work of planner Daniel Iacofano who has provided an extensive description of how he uses meetings and workshops to facilitate participation in a wide range of projects (Iacofano 2003).

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Some Useful Websites

American Planning Association: www.planning.org

American Society of Landscape Architects: www.asla.org

Association of Community Design: www.communitydesign.org

Children's Environments Research Group, CUNY: http://web.gsuc.cuny.edu/che

Children and Youth Environments: www.colorado.edu/journals/cye

Congress for New Urbanism: www.cnu.org

Environmental Design Research Association: www.edra.org

Landscape Architecture Foundation: www.lafoundation.org

Local Government Commission: www.lgc.org

Planners Network: www.plannersnetwork.org

Project for Public Spaces: www.pps.org

The Rural Studio: www. ruralstudio.com

Trust for Public Land: www.tpl.org

Urban Land Institute: www.uli.org

Urban Parks Institute: www.pps.org/urbanparks

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
An Evaluative Framework for Community-based Design[1]

Michael Rios

ABSTRACT

Initiated in the late 1960s as an alternative to the traditional practice of architecture and planning, community design can be defined by a commitment to building local capacity and providing technical assistance to low- and moderate-income communities through participatory means. While community design, built on a rich history of participatory practice is growing, substantive dialogue and reflection about its contribution to community development is lacking. This paper examines the efforts of university-based programs and presents an evaluative framework for community-based projects as a starting point. Treating universities and communities as coequals, a framework is proposed to measure the impacts of community-based projects for each.

INTRODUCTION

Community-based design is taught in many schools and practiced by numerous organizations and individuals in the public and private sector alike.[2] A 1997 survey conducted by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture identified over one hundred community design programs, centers, and nonprofit organizations in the United States and Canada (ACSA, 2000). Of the 123 architecture schools that offer a professional degree in North America, over 30 percent run university-based community design and research centers. Technical assistance, community outreach, and advocacy characterize much community design work emanating from university campuses. Despite these efforts, little has been done to assess this work as a whole. As an initial response, this paper presents an evaluative framework for community-based projects.[3] Measurements of organizational capacity building, policy generation and implementation, and the quality of service and input through community involvement are some examples. The proposed framework suggests that methods such as participatory action research hold promise in meeting the goals of both communities and universities.

Practitioners of community design identify and solve particular environmental problems where the problem is some combination of social, economic, or political in nature (Comerio, 1984). As