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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

such, community design is a distinctive form of professional practice—linking issues of social equity, the environment, and economic advancement. More than eighty community design and research centers are currently in operation nationwide, surpassing the number of centers in the early seventies that reached a peak with sixty centers.[4] Unlike the community design activity that grew out of the social activism of the sixties or the economic pragmatism that followed, today's centers are more diverse as a whole.[5]

One core value of community design is participatory decision-making. The participation of locally-vested groups and individuals is understood as a critical component in building capacity for community decision making, implementation of local programs, and successful outcomes on the ground.[6] Participatory decision making can include conducting community charrettes, utilizing user-friendly models and technology such as GIS and web-based delivery systems, inviting suggestions from the community throughout the design and development process, and offering technical assistance as a way to empower residents.

Changes in federal policy, economic restructuring, the emergence of sustainability as a design paradigm, and a move toward integrating public service into design curricula are several of the reasons academics and practitioners give for contemporary attention to community design. A review of recent surveys echoes these findings.[7] Regardless of the underlying reasons for an increased focus on community design, the number of university-based programs suggests a desire and need for this type of activity at institutions of higher education. To date, evaluation of community-based design has been conducted in relationship to mainstream architectural practice, without consideration of its own body of work.[8] Although community-based design has been at the leading edge of integrating teaching with community outreach for years, as a whole it has contributed little to the growing literature on service learning and public scholarship.[9]

If the community-based design movement is to grow, it will be critical for its proponents to share knowledge that can help guide design and planning education. The dissemination of knowledge and promising practices, opportunities for education and training, assessment of the movement's long-term impacts, and the creation of commonly accepted standards are urgently needed. The recent focus on university-based activity raises several questions related to the broader field of community-based design:

- What goals do community-based projects serve for institutions of higher education?

- What contributions to community development are being made by university-based programs and initiatives?

- How is quality defined for community-based design education and practice?

In the following sections, I argue the need for evaluating community-based design. After giving a brief overview of approaches to assessment in community settings, I present a working framework for evaluation.[10] I conclude with several challenges to university-based programs vis-à-vis communities and the factors affecting the quality of evaluation.

WHY EVALUATE?

Evaluation is a key element of successful community development. In this context, evaluation is used to measure neighborhood impacts, and to assess the process of activities and the role of intermediaries and local stakeholders.[11] Increasingly common is the use of indicators that measure the progress of project-defined goals that link benchmarks to desired outcomes.[12] Most indicator-driven projects use data and information readily accessible to the public, but can also include volunteer programs to generate data and measure progress as a form of citizen science. Community indicator projects range in scale from metropolitan regions to cities and municipalities.[13] Indicators that focus on community development are typically practice-based and include identifiable categories and themes such as housing, economic development, and community building.[14]

Most efforts to assess and document design projects utilize the case study method.[15] This method is a descriptive approach to evaluation initiated after project implementation, which makes concrete what are often generalizations and anecdotal information about projects and processes (Yin, 1994). Used as a staple of teaching in business and law schools, the case study method can provide useful information to practitioners looking for project precedents and can be a form of continuing education. Although it is beneficial in providing an in-depth analysis of a particular project, there are several limitations to the case study method. One difficulty is comparing across cases, especially when different types of information are being gathered. Evaluating projects comparatively is a critical first step before knowledge be can generated more systematically.

One alternative to the case study method that holds promise in evaluating community-based design is participatory action research (PAR). PAR has emerged as an important approach to citizen participation in guiding and, upon completion, evaluating community projects. As an alternative to the scientific method of research, PAR is "a way of creating knowledge that involves learning from investigation and applying what is learned to collective problems through social action" (Park, 1992: 30). Efforts in PAR have focused on community development, resource management, organizational decision-making, and community health, among other aspects.[16] Within schools of

architecture, PAR offers the possibility of combining sound methods with the knowledge and scholarship of practice. As a teaching and community outreach approach, PAR also offers the potential to improve current models of service learning that emphasize pre-professional assistance and pro bono services at the expense of research.

If they are assessed using a PAR approach, the results of community-based projects can also serve the interests of community groups as a tool to advocate for political resources (Nyden and Wiewel, 1992). This is a vital area of assistance given that many community groups turn to university-based design programs due to the lack of capacity and resources of grassroots organizations. Many university-based centers get involved in projects at the initial conceptual stages of a project and help groups frame issues and problems, taking into account complex social, economic, and political considerations. Project designs, reports, maps, and other technical documents can serve a political purpose to highlight resource disparities, articulate environmental concerns such as the prevalence of toxic sites in low-income neighborhoods, or help to organize a community in support of neighborhood improvements such as public parks and recreational facilities.[17] As such, PAR provides a means to measure results against early-defined goals and to identify critical elements within a project to help further a community's agenda or desired outcome. In addition to measuring tangible benefits as a result of university involvement, a PAR approach can also "put less powerful groups at the center of the knowledge creation process (and) move people and their daily experiences of struggle and survival from the margins of epistemology to the center" (Hall, 1992: 15-16). Shifting from expert to local knowledge creates the possibility for new sites of inquiry and discovery outside traditional academic settings—for both faculty and students alike. However, the collective benefits of work accrued by service learning projects can only be realized if knowledge is shared between schools *and* communities.

An important distinction between the case study method and PAR is that the latter includes a theory- or goal-driven form of evaluation (Chen and Rossi, 1992). While the method-driven evaluation of the case study approach follow a series of steps that are designed according to a predetermined set of criteria, theory-driven evaluation begins with a working hypothesis or goal established at a project's inception. It is important to note that the case study method does not assume a given outcome, or explicitly state an objective in evaluating the results of a project. For theory-driven evaluation such as PAR, hypotheses can be generated from abstract constructs, as well as hunches, to determine what is to be collected and what is to be measured to identify emergent patterns that match hypotheses. This approach allows tracking of the actual experience over time against the theory and allows for the testing of alternative

hypotheses.[18] The decision to use theory-driven instead of method-driven evaluation in community design projects depends on the overall goal of evaluation—what the evaluation is to be used for, its audience, and potential benefits derived from the assessment

Take, for example, the creation of a community facility on the site of an abandoned, trash-strewn lot. One theory that underlies this change could assert that as a result of the intervention, the surrounding physical environment would begin to improve. Thus, one would develop a series of benchmarks to measure this hypothesis, both prior to and after completion of the project. One relevant benefit of this form of evaluation is that it provides a framework from which to plan a project from conception through implementation. Also, evaluation could be used as an argument for procuring resources from city agencies if crime rates dropped in the surrounding area, or as a strategy to attract private investment if a heightened sense of pride and ownership among local residents resulted in property improvements adjacent to the community facility site.

A WORKING FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

The discussion thus far has focused on evaluation used outside the field of community-based design, and how the adoption of such methods could be beneficial to community-based design at universities. Given the emphasis on outreach by many university-based programs, one of the challenges in the future will be the ability to integrate service learning activities into the language of university research. A review of university-based programs conducted by the Hamer Center for Community Design at Penn State identified only seven of forty-one programs, or 17 percent, that evaluate projects (2003). However, new paradigms in community-based research that emphasize mutual engagement and collaboration, such as PAR, suggest an unprecedented opportunity to do so without compromising core values of community service and advocacy, while at the same time meeting pedagogical goals and curricular objectives. The following section presents a framework to evaluate the work of community-based design that proposes a twofold approach to assessment: 1) *centrifugal knowledge*: activities aimed toward the external goals of community groups and related community development intermediaries; and 2) *centripetal knowledge:* activities that are directed toward the internal goals particular to university-based community design programs.[19] For each, questions are posed as guides to evaluating community-based design projects and programs.

Centrifugal Knowledge

Given their historical roots in the civil rights movement in the sixties, many community-based projects have focused on the needs of low-income neighborhoods and disadvantaged populations. Although increasingly diverse in its focus, the

emphasis of this work is to serve community organizations and anticipated users of designed environments. These projects range significantly– from design-build affordable housing to streetscape designs, neighborhood plans to model code policy tools– and include both short- and long-term relationships with government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community groups. Within this context, projects aim to support community

AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF COMMUNITY DESIGN	
CENTRIFUGAL KNOWLEDGE *aimed toward the external goals of community groups and related community development intermediaries*	**CENTRIPETAL KNOWLEDGE** *directed toward the internal goals particular to community design practitioners, educators, and students*
1) technical assistance Whose interests have been served and with what results?	1) community involvement To what degree did citizens participate in a community design project, and what were the significant outcomes of their participation?
2) capacity building How do capacity building efforts further the mission and goals of community groups and individuals?	2) service learning How does service learning in community-based design education benefit students as future practitioners?
3) policy support To what degree did a community-based project shape regulatory or policy change?	3) promising practices What are the standards used in community-based design projects and how do those standards compare with those established by the profession?

Figure 1. Source: Rios, Michael (forthcoming). "Where Do We Go From Here? An Evaluative Framework for Community-based Design" in Service Learning in Architecture and Planning*, The American Association for Higher Education.*

goals and priorities, and can be part of a triad focused on *technical assistance*, *capacity building*, and *policy support.*[20]

Technical assistance often takes the form of plans, drawings, studies, and reports that enable community organizations to carry out their mission and/or objective. Often, activities will be concentrated at the beginning stages of a project to help gather information, frame issues, and provide documentation of the results. As such, technical assistance helps community groups to make key decisions and identify resources for implementation, and serves as a mechanism for developing consensus and support for a project. Thus, a key question is: *Whose interests have been served and with what results?*

Activities conducted by faculty and students fulfill an important educational and advisory role in helping groups develop their own capacity. Grant writing, development of budgets, zoning and data analyses, the use of technology, and meeting facilitation are some of the skills that can be shared with community groups. Several outcomes that measure *capacity building* include the strengthening of local institutions, increasing the ability of organizations and individuals to identify and secure resources for staffing or project implementation, gaining legal nonprofit status, or implementing a successful community-driven project or campaign. A challenge is to identify gaps and weaknesses in organizational capacity and utilize projects as vehicles to strengthen these areas. Thus, a key question is: *How do capacity building efforts further the mission and goals of community groups?*

Projects and studies carried out by service learning activities often include recommendations that lead to changes in policy and regulation. Policy support varies significantly and can also include recommendations for changes to city services, code enforcement, and other aspects of community regulation. A goal of *policy support* might be to educate community members, elected officials, and municipal staff about resource disparities, discrepancies in existing regulations, problems with procedural matters, or other policy-related issues. Outcomes to evaluate the role of policy support in community design activities could include changes to existing policies, reallocation of municipal resources, or the creation of new tools that address regulatory barriers. Thus, a key question is: *To what degree did a community-based project shape regulatory or policy change?*

Centripetal Knowledge

In addition to furthering the goals of community groups, an additional objective of university-based projects and programs is to improve the pedagogy and practice of design. In this way, community engagement allows students to utilize feedback to make better design choices, leading to decisions that are responsive to both the physical and social context of a given project. Community engagement also provides a space for

experimentation leading to promising practices that emphasize mutual engagement between universities and communities. Additionally, service learning experiences conducted through mechanisms such as community design centers can also help advance research unachievable in professional and classroom settings. For example, the application of on-site building methods related to straw bale and rammed earth allow for problem-based learning while providing a vehicle for research in community settings. As such, it is valuable to evaluate what is being created and tested, and how service learning experiences enhance pedagogy, practice, and research collectively. Assessing *community involvement, service learning,* and the identification of *promising practices* are three considerations that can be directed to the internal goals of community design projects and programs.

One of the primary components of any community design process is public involvement. Designers often solicit input, ideas, and criticism from neighborhood groups, municipal officials, and local residents in order to establish project goals and to guide the refinement of specific design proposals. Given the time and energy devoted to service learning activities to ensure adequate citizen participation, faculty and students should assess how successful they are in engaging communities in their work. Resident participation becomes a crucial element through various phases of the process and can contribute to the success of a project. One goal that bridges the external goals of community groups and those of professional practice is *community involvement*. Outcomes in the assessment of participatory projects could include the level of public involvement from project inception through implementation, increased levels of trust and volunteerism, skills development, or community awareness of a given issue. Thus, a key question is: *To what degree did citizens participate in a community design project, and what were the significant outcomes of their participation?*

As an increasingly critical element of university curricula, *service learning* has been identified as an important vehicle in creating a scholarship of engagement (Boyer and Mitgang, 1996). The service learning model of community design education teaches professionals the civic relevance of design, facilitates interdisciplinary learning and collective problem solving, fosters professional ethics, and introduces diversity issues into practice. Service learning is also an important vehicle for research and outreach to communities that lack resources. Assessing university-based service learning could include measures that benchmark civic and professional development, volunteerism, and social responsibility. Thus, a key question is: *How does service learning in community-based design education benefit students as future practitioners?*

The quality of community-based design can be measured by the number of awards and commendations received, as well as other forms of recognition such as publishing in peer-reviewed journals and securing external funding for community-based projects. However, the impact of community design can also be measured in terms of new methods and techniques that may be developed in the course of design, and the quality of completed projects. Outcomes in the assessment of *promising practices* could include the adoption of new methods, the durability and usability of built works and community environments, or the long-term sustainability of proposed strategies. Thus, a key question is: *What are the standards used in community-based design projects and how do those standards compare with those established by the profession?*

CONCLUSION

The purpose in proposing this framework is not to prescribe particular forms of measurement, but rather to define a starting point—from which architecture schools, community-based programs, faculty, and students alike can begin to develop goals to assess the outcomes of projects and related activities in community settings. Nor does the proposed framework suggest an exhaustive list of criteria. To do so would not acknowledge the diversity within the field and the varying sizes and organizational capacities among curricular programs and university-based design centers. Given the absence of an alternative, the evaluative framework suggested here should be viewed as an initial sketch open to interpretation, critique, and further development. It is also an invitation to design faculty to be more reflective and critical of their work in communities, and to help contribute to the growing body of knowledge in community-based design.

While what is suggested here may appear to be straightforward, there are several challenges to this form of evaluation, as there are when conducting any community-based project. Although community-based design projects are growing in schools of architecture, these activities are undertaken for different reasons and reflect different interests and values among faculty. For some they are to provide an enriching learning experience for students. For others community projects are either an outlet for alternative practice or a form of advocacy. Regardless of the motivation for creating such projects, it appears that service learning presents challenges for faculty, students, and communities when it comes to time commitments and meeting expectations for the overall quality of work.[21] It is also important to note that although university-based programs and projects may appear in line with work conducted by nonprofit community-based organizations, the organizational goals and priorities of nonprofits are often different than the institutional goals of universities and colleges. Faculty should be cognizant about the limitations of institutions of higher

education especially when it comes to resource and liability issues, while community organizations should understand that the primary function of universities and colleges is education, not solely service delivery.[22]

Beyond these general observations, there are several specific challenges to academic programs conducting evaluation of community-based projects. Conflicting goals between researchers and practitioners and methodological issues such as the objectivity of the evaluator when the same person is a participant need to be considered, as do questions of context and scale. For example, how is the community defined and what is the scale for assessment (e.g., building, block, neighborhood, etc.)? Additionally, evaluation is often shaped by external factors, such as public agencies and foundations that fund community-based projects.[23] How do these entities influence the goals of a project and the types of assessment to be conducted? Lastly, the issue of time is critical. Consideration for differences between 'university time' and 'community time' needs to be accounted for in the planning and implementation of curriculum-based projects. Evaluating both effective process and project outcomes can ensure greater success in community-based design projects.

In sum, evaluation of community-based projects should not be entered into lightly and takes a considerable amount of effort on the part of individual faculty members. However, the presence of programs at universities and colleges suggests that community-based design is here to stay. In order to deepen the knowledge within the field, community-based projects need to be viewed as an integral part of scholarship in teaching, research, and service. More reflective practice is needed in service learning—to illuminate the actions and activities of practitioners, both academic and professional. In the words of the late educator, Donald Schön, we must "discover what (we) already understand and know how to do" (Schön, 1991: 5). The changing landscape of our cities, towns, and neighborhoods provide an unprecedented opportunity for faculty and students alike to engage in issues of public significance through service learning. Now is the time.

ENDNOTES

[1] An earlier version of this manuscript will be published in *Service Learning in Architecture and Planning* by The American Association for Higher Education.

[2] In this paper, community design and community-based design are used interchangeably. The emphasis here is working with communities in local contexts. This is not to be confused with the term used to describe broad land use and settlement patterns.

[3] I would like to thank Sam Dennis for his thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript, in particular for helping me to refine the evaluation framework proposed in this paper.

[4] See Pearson 2002; Curry 1998.

[5] A 2003 survey of university-based community design conducted by the Penn State Hamer Center for Community Design Assistance categorized over forty programs by service area, type of mission, projects and services, and funding support.

[6] See Kretzman and McKnight 1993.

[7] See Gabler 1999; ACSA 2000; Hamer Center 2003.

[8] Comerio 1984 was the first published article that alluded to "defining success" in community design. However, the central focus of the paper was to evaluate community design vis-à-vis traditional professional practice.

[9] However, see Forsyth, Lu, and McGirr 2000.

[10] This framework grew out of a roundtable discussion at the Association for Community Design's annual conference held in Indianapolis in June, 2000; and further developed during a 2003 graduate seminar taught with Dr. Ian Baptiste, PSU Associate Professor of Adult Education.

[11] See Hyland 2000.

[12] For a definition of sustainable community indicators, see, for example, Kline 1995.

[13] 2000 review of community indicator initiatives conducted by the PSU Hamer Center for Community Design Assistance identified twenty projects nationwide.

[14] See Development Leadership Network 2001.

[15] See, for instance, Francis 1999.

[16] See Reardon, Welsh, Kreiswirth, and Forester 1993; Chambers 1993; Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1989; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, and Dow 1997.

[17] For example, see Hou and Rios 2003.

[18] Presentation by Scott Hebert, Abt Associates, *Structuring Case Studies and Other Forms of Self-Evaluation: Recommendations Regarding a Theory-Driven Approach.* New York: Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, March 2, 2001.

[19] This is not to suggest that the goals are mutually exclusive, but rather they reinforce each other to meet the needs of both communities and universities.

[20] This triad was developed by the Pratt Institute for Community and Environmental Development, one of the oldest community design centers in the country. See also Blake 2003.

[21] For a full discussion of challenges of service learning in planning and design education, see Forsyth, Lu, and McGirr 2000.

[22] There has been an increase in the reliance on universities to provide services for low-income communities. Although federal programs such as HUD's Community Outreach Partnership Center provide an avenue for community engagement and service learning, universities run the risk of creating dependency when they replace programs and forms of assistance once provided by government.

[23] See Jenkins and Halcli, 1999.

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