

Towards a Cultural Value of Design and Democracy

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In October of 2000 Design Corps held a conference at Princeton University called *Structures for Inclusion* and made the challenge that we should “design for the 98% who were currently un-served by architects.” This slogan has served as a rallying cry for a growing Public Interest Design movement over the last 13 years. Many projects have been created and many of these have been publicly well- documented over this time frame, including two exhibits curated by Cynthia Smith of the Cooper Hewitt Museum, *Design for the Other 90%* (2006) and *Design With the Other 90% Cities* (2010).

What we are seeing is the realization of the full potential of design, the highest and best use of design to serve 100% of the population and to address the most critical challenges we face in the world. We are now seeing the emergence of what can rightly be called public interest design. Similar to Public Health, this field looks at all issues that impact the whole of society. Like Public Interest Law, Public Interest Design seeks to provide services to the entire general public, not just the individuals who can afford to pay a fee for services.

While this relationship between design and the public interest has come into focus over the last decade, we designers are still at the beginning stages of what needs to happen. To become more community-oriented, and to reach the full potential of public interest design, we need to move past catchy names and rallying cries

into a deeper understanding of how this could be fulfilled. The evidence of this need has been collected during the last 13 years of many designers doing multiple projects. But individual projects and individual people have one shared problem: they can all be forgotten. To reach its potential, this movement must become systemic and permanent. To do this, public interest design must resonate on a deep cultural level. We must understand the cultural value that design can provide. How do these individual projects and people combine to form a collective action that demonstrates a value so intrinsically important to the public that it will remain lasting and memorable? So the challenge of *now* is to find this deep cultural basis for design that will give a resonating value to 100% of the general public. It may be fine for designers to espouse the new value of design. Without connecting to a deep cultural value, designers’ hopes for espousing value to their designs will be in vain.

The United States Constitution states that the ideal of equal justice is the cornerstone of our legal profession. The Hippocratic Oath which comes from the fifth century B.C. gives an ethical basis for the medical profession. Providing design services to the public—design that is distinct from just serviceable buildings—does not have similar deep value in our culture. I will make the case in this essay that it is the ideals of democracy that gives public interest design this cultural foundation that

it needs. Design and democracy are linked in a deeply powerful way that is both idealistic and practical. Both can be strengthened by building their relationship.

In the words of the great community leader and design advocate, Alice Cole of Bayview Citizens for Social Justice, “Design is all about having choices. We decide.”

Clarifying Design Ideals

If building codes represent the bare minimum that architects must accomplish, what represents the highest design ideals that designers can aspire to? If we fail to be clear about these ideals, how will the public ever learn what they could value most in our work?

Through an AIA Latrobe Prize for research, I was able to survey a representative blind sample of members of the American Institute of Architects. I asked this question: If a profession of public interest design were to exist, what would be an appropriate mission and principles?

75% agreed with this mission: Every person should be able to live in a socially, economically, and environmentally healthy community.

77% agreed with these principles:

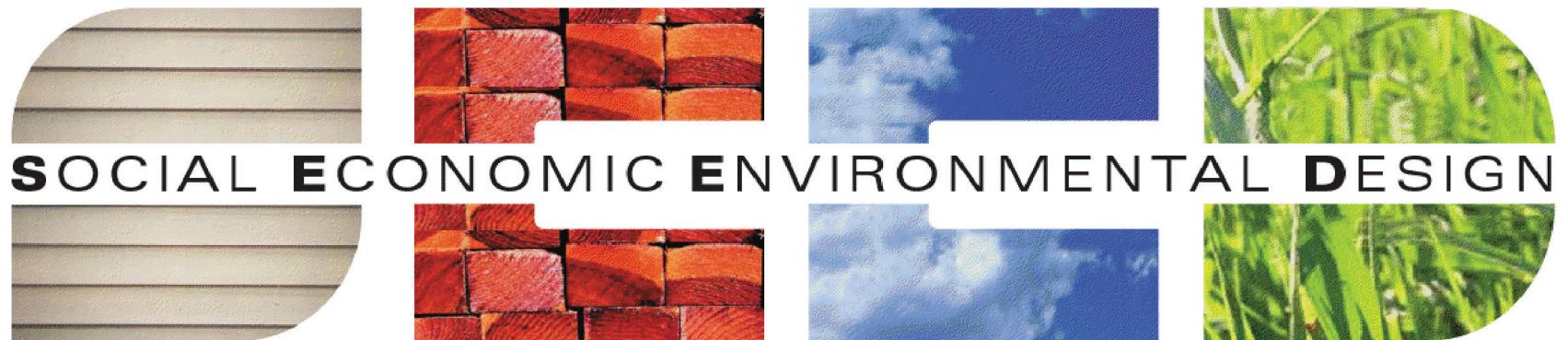
- Principle 1: Advocate with those who have a limited voice in public life.
- Principle 2: Build structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow community members to make decisions.

- Principle 3: Promote social equality through discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities.
- Principle 4: Generate ideas that grow from place and build local capacity.
- Principle 5: Design to help conserve resources and minimize waste.

A look at the overall meaning of these principles revealed a core essence of democracy and the use of the democratic decision-making process to identified ideas (Principles 2 and 4) through a process that respects minorities (Principles 1 and 3).

Additionally, as part of the Latrobe Prize research, Roberta Feldman, Sergio Palleroni, and David Perkes interviewed 100 practitioners about design projects that served the public interest. They found that 93% cited participation of users in the design process. This high level of decision-making involvement both demonstrates and supports the link between public interest design and the democratic design process.

From these findings, we can move to a “value proposition,” which is a statement that outlines the democratic design process valued by the public: Public interest design efficiently allocates public resources to a community’s greatest building priorities through a democratic decision-making process that is transparent and accountable. Identifying a mission, principles, and value proposition commences the process of enacting possible outcomes of public interest



design that would be beneficial to the public. Not only should a building provide shelter and meet basic functions, but through design, can meet these higher goals.

While identifying these aspirations is a needed step to take, the question then becomes: How do these goals become actions and then guide designers toward projects that realize such goals? The following are two small projects created in a summer studio at the University of Texas that demonstrate democratic design approach using a step-by-step process known as SEED for Social, Economic, and Environmental Design. Design here means participation.

“Beat the Bushes”

My personal conversion to this approach involved working for and with one of the great inspirations for this field, Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee. I had the privilege of teaching with Samuel Mockbee and working under him, in the summer of 1986. Seven years later, Sambo started the Rural Studio, and

I taught with him for two years from 1998 through 2000. When I first arrived at the Rural Studio, which was my first time teaching, I asked Sambo how the projects maintained such a high level of quality. His answer was both simple and profound, “We beat the bushes until the good ideas emerge, and then we grab them.” In this quote, there are three key principles that became fundamental for me. The first key is the use of the word “we.” I grew to learn that this included not just Sambo and the students, but the community and stakeholders on the project. The stakeholders are the vast number of those who had an interest—directly or indirectly, selfishly or altruistically. The second key is that good ideas can come from anybody—the art is recognizing that design is a process of collaboration and that no one person, such as a star architect, has all the good ideas. The third key is that design ideas are the critical assets that make the project become realized.

The challenge has been to translate this approach of one person and one

program into a systemic approach that many others could adopt. Specifically this needed to become both pedagogy and a clear design process. Unfortunately Sambo wrote almost nothing, despite being an inspiring teacher and lecturer.

Design Corps has pursued this goal in several ways. We have co-founded a network that is community-guided by these principles, the Social Economic Environmental Design Network or SEED. This network is a community that shares the defining principles of public interest design, as earlier stated. We pursue the goal of taking action to realize these principles through design. SEED provides guidance and also evaluates projects through an online tool called the SEED Evaluator. The best projects are shared through the SEED Award program and SEEDocs, which are short online videos.

Design Corps has also founded a professional training program called the Public Interest Design Institute,

which uses case methods of best practices to train professionals in this field.

The third way that Design Corps pursues this goal is through our Public Interest Design Summer Studio that supplements the traditional education of designers. Students get hands-on experience through a real project, from start to finish, going through the process with real stakeholders. The following examples are of the SEED principle-based design process and were completed in the summer of 2010 in partnership with the University of Texas.

The Public Interest Design summer program engaged an asset-based design approach. Rather than focusing on communities’ needs and problems, asset-based design focuses on the positive assets, skills, and capacities of communities in order to allow residents to become active participants in the design process. Students learned that during the process, in order to create truly im-



portant, influential, and meaningful projects, there must be an ongoing dialogue with and participation of community members, allowing them to voice concerns and give constructive feedback. This collaborative process empowers others through design; it shows the public that they are designers in their own right and that they too can create positive change in their own environments and communities.

Democracy is achieved through the decision-making process as expressed in the first four SEED principles. This requires understanding of who the stakeholders are in the project. Who is making decisions? How many from the community are involved?

Our invitation for the studio came from the University of Texas, the Austin Community Design and Development Center, and the Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation (GNDC). This local service organization not only identified for us the area we would serve, but they had years of experience and the resulting understanding of the people who lived there. They were our first stakeholders. The following two examples are both within this neighborhood.

Greening the Alleys

One of the potential projects we started researching was proposed for the studio by the City of Austin, Texas, to “green the alleyways.” This

may seem like a valuable idea, but it was noted immediately that this was a top-down idea and did not meet the goals of the democratic decision making process inherent in the SEED principles. Through a series of interviews, we looked for input from the residents of the Guadalupe neighborhood. They identified issues, challenges, and assets associated with the alleyways. Common issues in the neighborhood include speeding traffic, parking by downtown visitors on weekends, lack of identity, and continuity. Assets discovered include enthusiastic neighbors ready to tackle issues as well as the alley being a great place to stroll through the neighborhood.

The neighborhood residents also gave us their priorities, which was a critical step to meet the value proposition stated above. While many projects would be positive additions, the biggest impact would be achieved by addressing the highest priority, which was identified as “safety,” not “greening the alleys.” At this point, we as designers could say that safety was not within our skill set or budget. Hiring more police to patrol the area was not something we could provide. But here is the moment when understanding can trump cash. Safety did not mean police patrols, it meant slowing down traffic in the alley so that the children could play there. It also stemmed from an emergency incident when an ambulance had not

been able to find a home on the alley because there were no addresses. Understanding these particular issues led to a specific economic design proposal. Through close involvement with alley residents and City of Austin staff, a design was developed to address the stated concerns. A proposed alley address/garbage unit pinched the width of the alley, encouraging cars to slow down. It will aid in creating spatial organization for the alley, as well as a sense of identity and ownership. Additionally, it will increase safety in the alley as emergency vehicles will benefit from the address markers. Also, the creation of pavement markings for the alley acted as a traffic calming measure and provided neighborhood identity.

Rather than the city responding to this direction that we had failed to meet their objective of greening the alleys, their response was very positive. They had been seeking a way to accommodate Class C bike riders, a group that included children. While they had achieved success in accommodating Class A bikers, a group that is more experienced, they had not found any policies that could work well for Class C. Now we had provided an approach that could become citywide policy to serve another group of residents, with a minimum of resources needed. This design approach is an important lesson to planners who derive direction for the public good from an office and do not have the face-to-face feedback that allows resources to address priorities.

By addressing multiple neighborhood priorities with a single small intervention, we met the value proposition to efficiently allocate public resources to a community's greatest building priorities. This intervention occurred through a democratic decision-making process that is transparent and accountable. To further the impact and help advance this as a city-wide policy, we presented to the neighborhood stakeholders and City staff with a toolkit that will help them with ideas for future alley projects as well as connect them with the resources needed for such projects.

Utilizing Urban Green Space

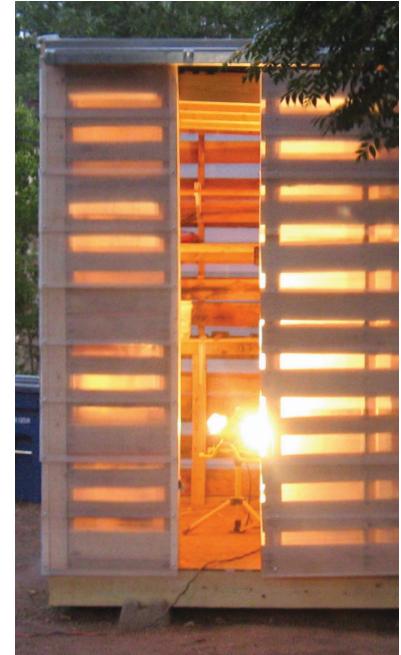
Often times, a yard in the city becomes an underutilized resource that could be incorporated into a resident's day-to-day activities, positively impacting their quality of life and increasing feelings of ownership, stewardship, belonging, and engagement. Similar to the neighborhood alleys, one asset in the Guadalupe neighborhood that was underutilized was the yards. The typical neighborhood housing type was a single-family or two-family bungalow with a small front and rear yard, but with a side yard almost equal to the house footprint. According to the GNDC, these yards were more of a maintenance liability and expense, than an asset for the residents. But what could be done to improve these spaces?

A quick brainstorm by students brought forth many ideas. What were



SHED [+] doors closed

the good ones? One of these was an aesthetic application—a building that was a glowing cube and many were attracted to the beauty of it. Another idea was a programmatic application—a chicken coop. We heard that there were some homeless chickens in the neighborhood, so three students went out to investigate this problem. Their search led them to a resident named Roland who was tending a small vegetable garden. He confirmed that the chickens lived in a tree in his yard, but they were not his. They had been living there since before he moved in. He did not think they would want to use a house because they were accustomed to the tree. He did occasionally find their eggs in his yard, which he ate or gave away.



SHED [+] doors opened

In further conversation with Roland, we learned that he was a self-employed house painter. He said that the GNDC did not like him to store his painting equipment in the yard, so he put most of it inside his small (600 square-foot) apartment. He agreed to our proposal that he work with us to make the yard more useful.

In the next week two things happened. The tree where the chickens had been living was cut down by GNDC because it was dead and they thought it was a hazard. Secondly, a new neighbor had been selected by GNDC to live in the rear unit of Roland's apartment. In conversation with the new neighbor, we found that he had a strong interest in owning

chickens. The program for a shed developed, not just as a solution for these two neighbors, but as a possible kit of parts for all the Guadalupe neighbors. For example, the shed could also accommodate Roland's gardening activity by holding his tools and by collecting rainwater from the roof—Austin was in an extreme drought at this time.

This modular and customizable system, SHED [+], could be thought of as “greening” of urban backyards. As the name suggests, the project begins with a core unit: the shed. Outdoor storage has been identified as a key need for Austin residents by individual homeowners, local property managers, and low-income housing corporations. SHED [+] provides increased opportunities for property upkeep and safe storage, but the [+] implies something more; the shed and its components can be viewed as an educational tool, immediately available for GNDC and their tenants, and potentially for the community at large. Add-ons such as vegetable beds, clotheslines, and a small chicken coop could demonstrate how sustainable systems function with one another.

Additionally, this particular design solution specifically demonstrates the potential for the SHED [+] to assist community members economically. For example, Roland was able to safely and conveniently store his tools and supplies outside of his apartment. The shed could be an equally beneficial option for other community members as well.

We realized this would only be used if the cost was very low. To reduce cost and meet the fifth SEED principle, used pallets were the primary building material. We used a traditional Japanese method, charring, to preserve the wood.

Overall, the four neighborhood projects proved that residents, design-

ers, and other stakeholders could be involved in shaping priorities such as safety, employment, and the environment. All of these were intensely localized solutions, but could have a broader impact.

Through this process, we hoped to demonstrate to those who became involved that design and the democratic decision-making process strengthen each other by providing a means to see the results of civic engagement. This encourages participation, which then creates empowerment and the possibilities of collective action.

On the last day, as we celebrated the completion of the projects, a neighbor drove by and called out, “How do I get one of those?”

Mark, the Executive Director of GNDC, called back to him, “Did you get a flyer in the beginning of the summer about our looking for design projects?”

“Yes,” the driver replied.

“Did you answer it?” Mark asked.

“No,” said the driver.

“Next time, answer it,” said Mark.

In other words, if you don't participate your voice won't be heard and you won't benefit. If you do participate, you see the realized benefits before you.

People want to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives, including shaping the physical environment. The combination of design and democracy provide an effective means to this end. Design can become the embodiment of democratic decision-making and they can effectively reinforce each other as they achieve a higher manifestation of each.

Two Public Interest Design Projects

*Project 1:
Utilizing Urban Green Space
SEED Evaluation Method¹*

Stakeholders

Roland and James (residents), Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Center, Austin Community Design & Development Center, East Austin House Farm, University of Texas College of Architecture, Blackland Community Development Corporation, Community First, and other local community development corporations and community housing development organizations.

Issues and Goals

Under-utilization of outdoor spaces as assets on many properties (specifically low-income rental properties), home-ownership, safety, increasing urban density, decreasing food security, lack of outdoor public spaces in East Austin, malleable and shifting East Austin culture.

Benchmarks

Establish a core unit and implementation system for the stakeholders and approve it with all of them, develop and design the various options and configurations of the extensions and possibilities, work with clients to make sure the built shed has everything clients need and want, and distribute the plans in the form of a handbook to neighborhood development corporations, local residents, and City of Austin.

Performance Measures

Usability of shed (qualitative post evaluation), contextually appropriate and ease of use, number of hens occupying coop, number of eggs produced by hens and number of eggs eaten or sold by James, amount of compost per month, and number of additional shed [+] structures adopted by other residents in neighborhood.

*Project 2:
Austin Alleys²*

Stakeholders

Residents use the alley for parking, trash, or as a pedestrian route. Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Center has residents in two houses along the alley, as well as many houses throughout the Guadalupe neighborhood.

Austin Community Design Development Center is affiliated with Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Center, and develops affordable housing (AFI) City of Austin supports our project and is interested in furthering the greening alley initiative.

Issues and Goals

Security, including both traffic and pedestrian safety, especially relating to the misuse of the alleys by visitors.

Performance Measures

Changing the perception of the alley, the number of residents surveyed before and after project implemented, and qualitative results of post-evaluation, number of residents formed into alley committee, number of neighborhood residents who “green” their respective alley, number of “toolkits” distributed to residents.

Notes

1. Design Team: Danica Adams-Planning and Sustainable Design, Emily McMillan-Landscape, Chris Murton-Landscape, Annie Palone-Landscape, Natalie Thomas-Architecture, Bea Vithayathawornwong-Architecture
2. Design Team: Lauren Bennett-Planning, Jimena Cruz-Sustainable Design, Kelly Heyer-Architecture, Stephen Klimek-Architecture, Rob Parsons-Planning, Molly Williams-Architecture, Jane Winslow-Planning PhD

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SHED [+]