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Public Interest Design: Expanding Architecture and Design through Process and Impact

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Public Interest Design: Expanding Architecture and Design through Process and Impact

Abstract
Public interest design expands the practice and education of architecture and design by shifting from the narrowly focused production of objects to a multidimensional process for achieving change and impact. It moves design from adherence to goals created by wealthy and powerful clients and policymakers to engaging proactively with a broad range of stakeholders. Design thus contributes to solutions to issues connected to the built environment, such as climate change, increasing urbanization, and growing inequity between rich and poor. Present in university design centers, nonprofit organizations, for-profit firms, and university courses, public interest design is providing new opportunities for students, young professionals, and others interested in using their knowledge and training to create positive futures.

Disciplines
Architecture

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Public interest design is a human-centered approach to the design of products, environments, and systems, expanding the disciplinary boundaries, professional practices, and relevance of architecture and other design disciplines in the twenty-first century. Architecture's social agenda, in place since at least the eighteenth century, has ebbed and flowed. Today the visibility of public interest design is expanding, creating opportunities for design to engage critical contemporary issues, achieving real impacts in real time. During the recent recession, public interest design flourished, expanding as traditional firms laid off employees and closed their doors. Brent Brown, founder of the Building Community Workshop, describes how "incubating" a nonprofit firm within a for-profit firm "opened up a new support stream for us... alongside an economic recession during which public design and the potential for philanthropic support was increasing" (Feldman et al., n.d., 43). Recent notable books documenting public interest design projects include Design Like You Give a Damn (Stohr and Sinclair 2006); Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism (Bell and Wakeford 2008); and Beyond Shelter: Architecture and Human Dignity (Aquilino 2011). Exhibitions such as the Cooper-Hewitt's "Design for the Other 90%" and "Design with the Other 90%: Cities" (http://www.designother90.org); two dedicated issues of Architectural Record (http://archrecord.construction.com); conferences such as Structures for Inclusion (https://designcorps.org/sfi14/); and myriad websites, blogs, and articles document public interest design's resurgence.
While a growing body of work reflects the scope of public interest design projects, less has focused on how contemporary public interest design builds upon and also breaks with traditional design practice, theory, and social impact. These shifts not only expand the range of people and issues design engages, but also create new opportunities for young professionals and students. Public interest design uses methods from disciplines including architecture, landscape architecture, and planning while also incorporating methods from social sciences and community activism. Contemporary public interest design is neither a detached professional service nor a passive advocacy for the underprivileged. It actively integrates knowledge from local people with design tools and thinking to challenge dominant power structures through design.

Faculty-led engaged research and teaching represent significant components of this work, bridging the academy, the professions, and multiple publics. The growth of engaged design work in the academy expands the impact of the university, students' future choices, and the goals and processes of their disciplines. This work contributes new knowledge while positively impacting the lives of real people.
Public interest design builds on long-standing design practices including integrative layering and experimentalism, but shifts the emphasis from products such as individual buildings and spaces to engaged processes. This opens the closed loop of professional expertise to include knowledge from local community partners and expands the scope of design work to include what Design Corps (https://designcorps.org) founder Bryan Bell calls "pre-form and post-form design," incorporating identification of needs and values, articulation of community goals, and evaluation of impacts (Bell, 2010, 76). This expansion also creates room in the design process for multiple participants, moving the discipline from employment by those with money and power to engagement with multiple publics and social issues.

**Why Now? Historic and Contemporary Public Interest Design**

Professions, including architecture and landscape architecture, emerged in the United States between the Civil War and the 1920s. Defined by expertise standardized through education, apprenticeship, and licensing, these professions developed to address "tasks of high social value" such as creating a built environment that would not fall down, easily catch fire, or spread disease (Cuff, 1991, 23). In conflict with this ideology of public service is the exclusivity of professional knowledge as a closed loop accessible only to those inside the profession (Awan, Schneider, and Till, 2011, 43). This knowledge is typically used in service to those "who can afford to pay professional fees and who receive, in exchange, highly customized responses to their specific needs" (Fisher, 2008, 9). As a result, "millions of American citizens, as well as billions of people around the world, battle the storms of inadequate services, unaffordable housing, and unsafe neighborhoods on a daily basis" while "architects affect only about two to five percent of all that gets built" (Fisher 2008, 9). Architecture's pairing of the "muse of artistic genius"
with the "authority of scientific reason" generates preoccupation with "the look and making of stuff" while neglecting participation of this "stuff" in larger social processes and conditions (Awan, Schneider, and Till, 2011, 37).

The "social project" of design has nevertheless been an integral part of architecture's agenda. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, architects responded to unsafe, unhygienic conditions, created by industrialization and increased urbanization, using newly available technologies of mass production and distribution to provide clean, livable buildings and cities for all (Dutton and Mann, 1996, 2). Motivated by the desire to bring as much benefit to as many people as possible, these designers focused on creating universal standards that could be applied anywhere to address social issues, such as lack of adequate housing. This was possible because of replicable design and construction methods made possible by new technologies such as reinforced concrete and mass production. The emphasis on universal standards through technology is a core principal of modernism in design that links the idea of the modern as socially progressive with a positivist idea of problem solving through universal scientific and technical principles.

However, modernism's emphasis on universality ultimately undermined its social agenda. Universal solutions to social problems, such as high-rise, high-density housing blocks, removed the social and spatial complexities of inner-city neighborhoods without regard for specifics of place, culture, and individuality. For example, the multi-building high-rise Pruitt-Igoe housing project, built in the mid-1950s in St. Louis, Missouri, replaced an inner city, largely African American "slum." While its intent was to replace overcrowded housing and stabilize land values, it removed local businesses, employers, and social networks, exacerbating the conditions of poverty and racial segregation it was designed to improve. Largely vacant and in extremely poor repair, the city began demolishing the complex with explosives in 1972.

In 1976, architecture critic Charles Jencks called the implosion of Pruitt-Igoe "the birth of postmodernism" (Dutton and Mann, 1996, 13), demolishing the master narrative of modern universality to make way for the heterogeneity of postmodernism. In contrast to modernism, postmodernism favored giving attention to multiple cultural topics and groups, emphasizing the importance of difference through the participation of multiple stakeholders. Practices in participatory design and planning developed from this emphasis, many of these practices inform contemporary public interest design.
Postmodernism relied heavily, however, on form and image to express identity, leading to emphasis on the appearance of design at the expense of its social role. Some participatory practices also downplayed the role of design, positioning designers as uncritical advocates for local agendas.

Beginning in the 1990s, architecture has been dominated by two primary directions, both of which have become passive tools of neoliberal socioeconomic systems by ignoring design's political role in expressing and shaping social values. Architecture as visual spectacle, often enhanced by computer-aided design and fabrication, creates images to generate profit through tourism and consumption. Exemplified by Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (http://www.guggenheim.org/bilbao), this aspect of contemporary architecture emphasizes the work of select "starchitects." The second direction takes a seemingly neutral positivist position, using rational systems to generate architecture through formulas based on quantifiable evidence, such as the performance determinism of the LEED Gold CityCenter in the unsustainable context of the Las Vegas desert (Quirk 2012). The associated professionals become "expert agents for an increasingly technocratic society" rather than "keepers of a particular branch of socially important knowledge," producing a built environment that is "conceived away from the world in which the results are eventually located" (Awan, Schneider, and Till, 2011, 37–38).

At the same time, public interest design reemerged with new emphasis on being proactive and relational, engaging equity in everyday life and addressing critical contemporary issues including disaster resilience, poverty, and political marginalization. In this model, design is an instrument of social production that challenges the hegemony of the market. Contemporary public interest design avoids the large-scale, socially determinist reforms of modernism in favor of local, small-scale, flexible interventions (Awan, Schneider, and Till, 2011, 39). By positioning specific local projects within broader global issues, it also avoids the fragmentation of postmodernism by building bridges within the contemporary condition described by Manuel Castells as the "growing tension and articulation between the space of flows and the space of places" (Castells, 2011, 576).

For example, our Iowa State University Community Design Lab and Bridge Studio's (http://research.design.iastate.edu/communitydesignlab/) work with the Time Check neighborhood in Cedar Rapids connects increased run-off from industrial agriculture
with the impacts of flooding in that urban neighborhood. By gaining local knowledge from residents and combining it with designs that layer ecological, economic, and social systems, we were able to propose ideas for new kinds of public space, recreation, and business opportunities to help the neighborhood reestablish its identity and create a potential local future within these larger systems. Design is thus not only "the arrangement of materials and space," but "an enabler of positive change in day-to-day life, a place where identity, character, daily life, and even the spirits of the users are manifest" (Bell, 2010, 77).

Figure 2: Proposal for "green ribbons" in the Time Check neighborhood, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2012. The ribbons connect Ellis Boulevard, the main neighborhood thoroughfare with commercial nodes, with the Cedar River by combining a four-stage storm water management system with multi-modal trails and public spaces (diagram on right). The ribbons are created by knitting together parcels now owned by the city as a result of post-flood buy-out programs (diagram on left). Land between the ribbons can be
converted to wetlands, parks, or new housing, depending on flood plain location as determined by the still-pending construction of flood protection levees along the river.

Drawings by Amanda Havel and Melissa Goodwin.

From Product to Process: Engagement

Public interest design expands disciplinary boundaries by redefining what architect Teddy Cruz calls the "operational processes of architecture itself as well as the role of architects in the context of the shifting boundaries of the contemporary city" (Cruz, 2004). This expands architectural focus from building forms to including the processes of building agendas, the larger socioeconomic and ecological situations they engage, and the breadth of people involved in making decisions. This shift redefines the relationship between designer-client and designer-society similar to how contemporary participatory art positions the artist as an engaged facilitator of activities rather than a lone producer of objects, thus complicating how we understand "where the productive moment of signification action—in a semiotic sense—takes place within an artwork or its structure" (Gillick and Lind, 2013, 204). The creative role is thus not simply to create a product in response to criteria articulated by a client or generated by internal desires, but rather to enable and participate in a process that includes partners from other disciplines and the local knowledge of community partners. The architect's role expands from form-maker or problem-solver to include "transformative action . . . to take into account the consequences of architecture as much as the objects of architecture" (Awan, Schneider, and Till, 2011, 33).

Redefining how decisions are made redefines what design is, moving away from an individual working at a drawing board or computer to a collective process in which design could occur any time someone raises an issue, makes a choice, or otherwise shapes the direction or outcome of the process (Cuff, 1991, 61). This shift allows design to engage the complex, "wicked" problems of our time that involve contradictions, dynamic situations, multiple voices, incomplete information, and situations that are serious and significant (Rittel and Webber, 1973, 160). Using interactive, partnership-based processes move the designer into a role as a spatial agent "who effects change through the empowerment of others" (Awan, Schneider, and Till, 2011, 32).
Public interest designers must be proactive, working with multiple partners to identify assets and barriers, define goals, and articulate directions. While the designer brings professional knowledge and tools to the relationship, local partners bring critical knowledge about local culture, practices, and values. The designer sees situations with new eyes, bringing alternatives to conditions local partners may view as impenetrable. Local partners understand how the material components of a place, such as houses and trees, represent broader nonmaterial values, such as stability and friendliness. They know the history of their place and how they interact with it daily. The partnership engages complex conditions more effectively than either partner can alone.

In the Community Design Lab, we use a range of engagement methods to raise awareness and support for community projects. (See Fig. 3.) Techniques from social activism and social sciences such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups, help gather preliminary feedback and establish the range of a community's interests. We intersperse small-group meetings with large interactive public gatherings, producing maps and experiential drawings to illustrate existing conditions and new ideas. These methods are valuable, but often do not include individuals who are intimidated by speaking in front of groups, feel undervalued, or are unable to attend meetings. Such individuals may possess invaluable knowledge of history, social networks, and operations in specific places. To engage them requires spontaneous interactions including on-the-street conversations and small-scale, mobile installations in strategic locations, such as bus stops, convenience stores, and parking lots.
Figure 3: Iowa State University Bridge Studio students conduct an open house with residents of Coming, Iowa, spring 2010. They present a range of design, systems, and material options for the Iowa House, an affordable housing prototype incorporating energy- and water-efficient strategies as part of the federal Neighborhood Stabilization Program. Students gained feedback from a wider audience by creating stations as community events and conducting spontaneous interviews at key locations like the local Casey's gas station/convenience store.

Photo by author.

From Product to Process in Design Thinking

Democratic processes may appear to break down the value of professional knowledge by removing its exclusiveness and equally valuing knowledge from nonexperts. In fact, this process builds upon characteristics that are inherent to design. While often undervalued in design, use of design thinking processes in business courses and by
hospitals, product developers, and manufacturers speak to its relevance in the contemporary world. As discussed by Tim Brown, CEO and president of the innovation and design firm IDEO, key components of design thinking include imagining the world from multiple perspectives; integrating contradictory aspects of a complex problem; believing that "at least one potential solution is better than the existing alternatives;" exploring and questioning to move in "entirely new directions;" and working with partners with multiple types of expertise rather than relying on "the myth of the lone creative genius" (Brown, 2008, 87).

Many aspects of conventional design pedagogy and practice incorporate the components that Brown describes. Developing multiple iterations is a long-standing design tactic that combines empathy, integrative thinking, and experimentalism to explore multiple possible solutions for a problem, which students are frequently asked to do, such as in undertaking a building massing study. (See Fig. 4.) This helps students learn that there is no "right" answer to a design problem. Instead, they create options and learn to develop evaluation criteria in order to choose which to employ.

Figure 4: This series of site massing studies investigates how a community arts center in St. Louis, MO, can differently address street edges and program adjacencies, and create different types of outdoor spaces. The goal was to create a catalyst for a
neighborhood suffering from loss of population, building fabric, and voice as a result of socioeconomic degradation and racial isolation.

Photo by author.

Professionals, too, present multiple options to clients, particularly in early project stages, so that clients feel included in the process and learn to trust the expertise of the professionals. In public interest design, this method still includes formal and performance studies to evaluate options. Evaluation criteria are also linked to broad issues of community priority and equity. For example, the performance question "Which configuration is most energy efficient?" is enhanced by additional social factors, becoming "Which configuration best fits the neighborhood context, is easily manageable for occupants, and provides as much energy efficiency as possible?"

Rather than focusing on energy performance alone, the socially oriented question integrates this technical issue with physical context and social engagement, generating an outcome that has greater benefit for more people. Public interest design expands the layering of issues to include local knowledge and global socioeconomic concerns in addition to form, function, and performance.

In the Community Design Lab at Iowa State, we use iterative, layered tactics with community partners to visualize the implications of choices and assist with decision-making. In Maquoketa, we identified key assets and issues through interactive meetings, and then developed three alternative scenarios to illustrate the impact of different emphases on downtown revitalization. Called Local, Corridor, and District, these scenarios built, respectively, on promoting small-scale local business development, creating linear connective corridors that intersect in the downtown, and creating overlapping arts and historic districts. Each scenario presented a different organizational strategy as well as economic development focus. Preferred aspects of each scenario were combined in the final design. Diagrammatic maps illustrated how components would be organized while experiential drawings illustrated the qualities of specific spaces. This material was then used to generate short-, medium-, and long-term schedules and requirements for implementation. The community could use these materials to raise funds through grant applications, while maintaining public interest and awareness in the multiyear process of revitalizing their downtown.
**Figure 5:** Scenario options for Maquoketa, Iowa downtown revitalization, fall 2013. The Local option emphasizes the creation of a small-business start-up area along a street parallel to the commercial Main Street. The open space between the two streets, the result of a building fire, becomes a hardscape square to increase a sense of urbanity. The Corridor option uses streetscaping and façade improvements on Main Street and a major cross street to create a strong identity focused on the historic downtown. The District option identifies several overlapping zones including the Main Street corridor (pink), a concentration of municipal services (green), and an area of historic homes (yellow). Each would have a distinct streetscape identity with the open space acting as a "hinge" for public activities including performances and farmers markets.

Iowa State University Community Design Lab. Drawings by Courtney Long and Chad Hunter.

**New Project Types**

Expanding design’s focus from products to processes also expands the types of projects designers take on and their breadth of community impact. Including decision-making frameworks, policies, and infrastructures in the scope of design connects specific spatial products, such as buildings and streetscapes, to larger issues. For example, a design for a single house focuses on the specific needs and desires of that homeowner. Design for a system of housing that can be adapted to multiple locations and demographic contexts connects specific housing units to social empowerment through financial equity, and individual homeowners to an inclusive socioeconomic strategy.

As described by Bryan Bell, "[Public interest] designers help to define problems and locate opportunities where design has the potential to change the lives of individual people and communities" (Bell, 2010, 76). In the Bridge Studio, one of the teaching components of the Community Design Lab, students created proposals for the revitalization of the flood-damaged Time Check neighborhood in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. (See Fig. 6.) Working with residents through interviews, interactive meetings, and open houses, students identified important neighborhood pre-flood qualities that they used to
propose and interrelate multiple project types. For example, strong connection to the Cedar River was a historic part of neighborhood identity. Since almost all houses on the land between the main commercial corridor and the river had been destroyed, creating systems to connect and re-inhabit this space in new ways became a foundation for the studio.

Figure 6: Analysis of pre-flood and post-flood conditions in the Time Check neighborhood, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2012. The image on the left shows the building footprints of this largely residential neighborhood prior to the 2008 flood. The center image shows the loss of close to 50% of the building fabric from the flood; most of this land is now within the 100-year flood plain and has minimal opportunity for rebuilding without additional flood management systems. The image on the right identifies key areas of open space (green), commercial nodes (orange), and the central neighborhood commercial node at the heart of the neighborhood (cyan).

The proposals included design criteria for new commercial buildings, a system of recreation trails and public spaces connected with storm water management, and revised housing densities and types to support commercial development. (See Fig. 7.) The student work contributed to the professional planning studies of Ellis Boulevard, helping residents articulate their priorities and interact effectively with city officials and professionals. Regulations being developed for the district will guide area development, facilitating goals defined during the semester, such as greater connection to the Cedar
River and concentrated commercial nodes serving local interests (City of Cedar Rapids and JLG Architects 2013).

Figure 7: Studies of housing density and types in the Time Check neighborhood, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, spring 2012. Students examined how different housing densities could support local businesses desired by residents, concluding that a higher density was needed than in pre-flood conditions (top). Working with the “green ribbon” system shown earlier, they identified areas for higher density housing, made possible by flood control through the ribbons and through wetland restoration along the river (lower left). They then developed a range of housing types, demonstrating how these could fit into the existing neighborhood context (lower right).

Iowa State University Bridge Studio. Drawings by Megan Schneider, Erin Broadrick, Adam Ninnemann.
Emphasizing Impacts: Building Relationships

Shifting the focus of design from product to process not only expands its scope, but also foregrounds its impacts, as in the overlay district in Cedar Rapids, as central design goals. Form and performance remain important components of design, but decisions about them are made in terms of larger impacts rather than preference or narrow criteria. This reestablishes the cultural relevance of design by returning it to its role described by former Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer as "a process of giving form and pattern to the social life of the community" (Ward, 1996, 33). Focus on process establishes the physical products of design as components of a broader spectrum of conditions. Impacts include building relationships and creating change in social, ecological, and economic systems to better many people's lives.

Through engaged process, design provides a proactive role for people who have had little or no voice in shaping their environments. As described by Roberta Feldman, Director Emeritus of the University of Illinois at Chicago's City Design Center, this process requires "an educational process based on mutual respect and understanding of one another's expertise" (Feldman, 2003, 111). Alone, communities struggle to move outside their existing visions of present and future; the designer's ability to see potential and frame multiple options helps draw out the assets and goals that serve as project foundations.

Valuing this process requires expanding the idea of impacts from physical results—number of units constructed or kilowatt-hours of energy conserved—to relationships created within a community that expand a project's scope to a larger issue. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, the public outreach arm of ISU as a land-grant university, has helped the Community Design Lab develop evaluation protocols that include measuring the numbers, types, and importance of relationships our projects create. Assessment demonstrates to the university and the state the value of our partnerships as networks increasing capacity to engage broad issues like climate change through specific projects focused on energy efficiency, storm water management, and urban agriculture.

Such impact is exemplified by the Ellis Boulevard Urban Farm in Cedar Rapids, developed by nonprofit Matthew 25 in partnership with the Bridge Studio
The project was a two-acre urban farm on scattered residential parcels where homes had been lost to flooding. The studio created an overall design concept despite the fragmented site, and also developed a series of smaller-scale components that could be implemented over time. (See Fig. 8.) To satisfy city requirements, strategies for storm water management and border articulation were developed through a zoning amendment allowing certain agricultural land uses within city limits. After two years in operation, the farm has yielded large quantities of fresh produce in an area without a local grocery store. As a result of the urban farm, Matthew 25 has conducted community education programs, worked with numerous volunteer groups, and built an educational garden at the local elementary school. Through public presentations, one-on-one conversations with local residents, and meetings with government and civic organizations, the studio helped Matthew 25 develop relationships with the city planning department, the local neighborhood association, the city council, local architects and landscape architects, and various nonprofits. Today, Matthew 25 is one of the leaders in a city-wide effort to use urban agriculture to combine local food systems with post-flood land development. Cedar Rapids is one of three partner communities working with the Community Design Lab to develop a replicable agricultural urbanism toolkit.
community activities including an educational play area, storage and processing areas in repurposed garages, and a connecting pavilion for educational programs and community-sponsored agriculture pick-ups (bottom left). Vegetables with multiple plantings, such as lettuces and radishes, are located near the center to encourage interaction while single-planting crops like corn and pumpkins occur at the periphery. The bench system uses vocabulary from the pavilion to create a series of modular units that can be deployed around the farm (right). All built components are designed to be easily constructed by volunteers using primarily recycled materials.

Iowa State University Bridge Studio. Drawings by Jamie Cunningham and Michael Thole.

Emphasizing Impacts: Creating Change

One of the most important impacts of public interest design is generating change. As discussed by Anthony Ward, "The operation of professions under capitalism . . . frequently and perhaps essentially serves the values and needs of specific dominant classes at the expense of others. Architecture is still 'nothing but social,' yet its social practice has both supported and reinforced existing social hierarchies and has operated mostly as a mechanism of oppression and domination" (Ward, 1996, 27). Shifting focus from products to processes reconfigures how spatial conditions are created, generating "an architecture that moves the field beyond the design of buildings and toward the design of new processes of engagement with the political forces that shape theories, practices, academies, policies, and communities" (Gámez and Rogers, 2008, 19). By changing the rules underlying the production of the built environment, public interest design also uses tactics from civil disobedience and performance art that give the small and disempowered control within a limited time, planting seeds for larger systemic changes.

The Bridge Studio's Pop-Up! Time Check project used these tactics to occupy an intersection in Cedar Rapids for one day, demonstrating how a once-vibrant area, now empty as a result of natural disaster, could once again become a center for the neighborhood. Using temporary installations and activities developed in partnership with local schools, businesses, and residents, this student project brought over 200 people to a space seen as empty and abandoned. (See Fig. 9.) The installations did not create temporary buildings, but instead created social situations through activities and spatial relationships. A temporary coffee shop, a Frisbee golf course, and a reconfigurable musical walkway were just some of the activities that engaged people
of all ages. Temporary events like this have become important public interest design vehicles, allowing communities to test new ways of occupying space while generating enthusiasm for ongoing projects. These events demonstrate empathy in design thinking by visualizing a new future in four dimensions, creating immersive experiences that can foreshadow more permanent new futures.

Figure 9: Local residents and Bridge Studio students interact at the temporary coffee shop during the Pop-Up! Time Check event, spring 2013. The coffee shop, created by architecture students Zach Sunderland and Colin Delano, occupied the space outside the refurbished Chirp’s Autobody building. Purchased by local residents and rehabbed with a commercial space in front and car repair in back, the building has been empty because of perceived financial risk for potential tenants. The temporary coffee shop was created to demonstrate how much activity can be generated by a small operation, also showing the potential of outdoor as well as indoor space at Chirp’s. The students constructed the stand using recycled materials and developed a partnership with a local coffee roaster who donated supplies. Negotiations are underway with the roaster for leasing the Chirp’s commercial space.

Photos by author.
Emphasizing Impacts: Students are the Future

Including design students in public interest design projects has significant impact. Designers' understanding of professional behaviors and ideologies are established in school; students can bring an understanding of engaged process and the transformative power of design to their lives after graduation. Bridge Studio projects are always interdisciplinary, with students from architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, and planning working collaboratively to engage communities, develop design alternatives, and focus decisions on a final project. (See Fig. 10.) While the scope and objectives of studio projects are limited to fit within one academic semester and fulfill student learning needs, public interest design projects are typically located within multi-year relationships between communities and faculty. The Community Design Lab has been a significant resource for maintaining these relationships and enabling studio work to be located within larger projects.

Figure 10: Bridge Studio students engage with residents of the Time Check neighborhood by visiting local business owners and conducting small group discussions, spring 2013. Students spontaneously met with owners and staff at the Flamingo restaurant (left) as a result of looking for a restroom on a cold day. The Flamingo became an important partner in the Pop-Up Time Check! event, providing space, equipment, and restroom facilities. They also hosted community meetings and provided publicity. Other student groups met with residents and local officials at the Groundswell youth art center, operated by Matthew 25 (right). Ongoing work is now focused on implementing affordable housing and agricultural urbanism strategies in the neighborhood as prototypes for the rest of the city.

Photos by author.

An important component of effective public interest design in education is the reflection that the protected environment of the university allows, giving students the opportunity to thoughtfully understand what they are doing before applying it in the professional world. The Bridge Studio builds on service-learning methods developed in
multiple disciplines, providing a framework in which "students learn not only about social issues, but also how to apply the new knowledge to action that addresses real problems in their own communities" (Campus Compact, 2003, 7). In both service-learning and many design studios, students begin by investigating an issue, then engage with it through direct action, and finally reflect on their experiences. Students then take these experiences, values, and skills into their future lives to ultimately change their professions and world.

**Opportunities to Participate in Public Interest Design**

Design centers located within universities have been a mainstay of public interest design since the Pratt Center for Community Development was founded in 1963 ([http://prattcenter.net/about-pratt-center/our-history](http://prattcenter.net/about-pratt-center/our-history)). These centers engage in public interest design through research and teaching as well as projects, expanding not only the scope of practice, but also the ways in which academic institutions consider research and scholarship. While these centers vary widely, their connection to university missions creates a focus on the production of knowledge and its implementation for the betterment of society. Knowledge thus becomes more than a product of internal academic investigation for an academic audience, but is generated through partnerships outside the university for/with a range of audiences. These centers expand connections between universities and local communities, breaking down barriers and suspicions about the value of higher education. The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio with Mississippi State ([http://www.gccds.org](http://www.gccds.org)), the Detroit Collaborative Design Center with the University of Detroit Mercy ([http://www.dcdc-udm.org](http://www.dcdc-udm.org)), and the University of Arkansas Community Design Center ([http://uacdc.uark.edu](http://uacdc.uark.edu)) are just a few of the university-based centers that have had significant impact through public interest design and upon which the Community Design Lab at Iowa State is modeled. Some of the most significant venues for public interest design are individual courses and curricular programs. Championed by committed faculty, students engage with communities and issues in a variety of ways. Many of these programs feature design/build studios in which students work with community members to design and build projects using appropriate technologies. An early and well-known example is the Rural Studio at Auburn University, founded by Samuel Mockbee and D.K. Ruth in 1993 ([http://www.ruralstudio.org](http://www.ruralstudio.org)). Other significant programs include the BaSiC Initiative
(http://www.basicinitiative.com), a collaboration between Portland State University and the University of Texas at Austin, and the Miami University of Ohio Center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine (http://arts.miamioh.edu/cce/). In these immersive programs, students live in partner communities to experience day-to-day life and often come to appreciate local knowledge. Non-immersive programs include the Bridge Studio at Iowa State, in which students work with community partners through frequent visits and workshops alternating with studio work. Digital communication enables students in non-immersive programs to maintain close contact with community partners. Project blogs and chat rooms have become other important components of this work.

Opportunities for young professionals to participate in public interest design are expanding. University-based design centers offer a range of employment opportunities including full-time post-graduation positions, summer internships, and part-time academic year assistantships. The Enterprise Rose Architectural Fellowship, established in 2000, partners recent graduates with local community development organizations for three years, expanding the capacity of host organizations while building the leadership capacity of young designers (http://www.enterprisecompany.com/solutions-and-innovation/design-leadership/rose-architectural-fellowship). Independent nonprofit design centers like the buildingcommunityWORKSHOP (http://www.bcworkshop.org/bcW/) also provide full-time employment. The number of for-profit firms focused primarily on public interest design, like SHED Studio in Chicago, Illinois (http://www.shedchicago.com), or incorporating public interest design into a broader practice, like BNIM in Kansas City, Missouri (http://www.bnim.com/news/bancroft-school-redevelopment-wins-public-interest-design-award), is expanding.

**Challenges and Conclusions**

While opportunities in public interest design are expanding, many challenges remain. For professionals, the financial structure of this work can be significantly different from that of normal fee-paying clients, and the scope involved often does not fit into phases typically used to organize office projects and staff. Through foundation funding, nonprofits can develop projects while also making payroll, causing some for-profit companies to develop nonprofit components. Integrating public interest design into
traditional design practice requires planning and potential restructuring, but also represents an expanding client base for the design professions.

While university programs once had the advantage of funding salaries, equipment, and space through internal teaching and research funding, this support is shrinking as state appropriations diminish and universities increasingly look for outside funding to subsidize these efforts. Design center faculty and staff must put considerable time and energy into securing grants and fees to support project research and scholarship. University-based public interest designers also face potential conflicts between academic requirements for faculty and the position of community design work. Working with a community is frequently a multiyear process that requires building trust, establishing communication, articulating assets and goals, and determining processes before graphic or written materials are produced. While design work from private architecture firms can be documented as scholarship through professional awards programs, community design work is rarely recognized because of its focus on process and impact over product.

Reports, tools, and built work created with communities are important products of public interest design, but academic audiences frequently look on these as non-scholarly unless they are presented in conventional publications such as academic journals. Raising discussion of public interest design within the academy as a form of engaged scholarship is an important part of creating legitimacy for it within universities that can then be carried outward into the professions. A growing number of evaluation tools are available to assist in establishing the work's merit and value. Community-Engaged Scholarship for Health offers a free online tool that "peer reviews, publishes, and disseminates products of community-engaged scholarship that are not journal articles—videos, curricula, policy reports, digital stories, and online toolkits, for example" (http://ces4health.info). While it began reviewing community health impact work, CES4Health now evaluates a wide range of public interest work including design. The Social Economic Environmental Design (SEED) program provides a peer network, an evaluation and certification tool, an awards program, and training through the Public Interest Design Institute in order to assist designers in gaining feedback and recognition for public interest design (http://www.seed-network.org).

Public interest design expands disciplinary boundaries, the roles of designers in society, and opportunities for students and recent graduates by breaking down the closed loop
of exclusive professional design knowledge to include local knowledge and interdiscip- linary partnerships in nonhierarchical ways. This work emphasizes the articulation, development, realization, and evaluation of systems and processes that connect decisions about the physical world to values of equity and social justice. It prioritizes impacts, including empowering community partners; building new relationships; and generating change in lives, communities, professions, and larger social structures. Public interest design provides new opportunities for design students, faculty, and professionals to reestablish the relevance of design as an important actor in reducing inequity, promoting sustainable ecology, and creating opportunities for prosperity. Public interest design demonstrates design's ability to affect structures of power through the built environment by challenging dominant decision-making systems that rely on short-term economic benefits for the few, rather than considering the long-term well being of the many.

Notes

1 Examples of projects that illustrate this approach include Project Row Houses in Houston (http://projectrowhouses.org/) and the Greystone Project in Chicago (http://www.thegreystoneproject.com/home/), both of which use architectural sites as frameworks for art and design activities by artists-in-residence, community organizations, and education programs, to create pathways for the participation of low-resourced populations. Projects like Teddy Cruz's Alternative Housing Overlay Zone in San Ysidro, California demonstrate how local practices such as non-permitted uses and additions to buildings can create cultural presence in a community and ultimately change zoning policy to legitimize these practices (Cruz, 2004, Case Study 1). Urban-Think Tank's Metro Cable project in Caracas, Venezuela created a transportation infrastructure using local knowledge to connect poor peripheral neighborhoods to the city center and build in social programming such as sports, music, and education facilities (http://www.u-tt.com/projects_Metrocable.html).

2 Another example is the transformation of a parking space into a park for two hours by Rebar's PARK(ing) Day project, an initiative started in San Francisco in 2005 that has expanded into an international open-source event. Purchasing a parking space by using the meter, participants occupy the parking space with
activities ranging from lemonade stands to temporary libraries to kayaking demonstrations (PARK(ing) Day (http://parkingday.org). This tactic inverts the purpose of the space as temporary car storage, calling attention to the amount of space given to cars rather than human activities and demonstrating how this space could be used differently.

Work Cited


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