

Engaging the Everyday

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Hannah Teicher's essay won the first prize in the 2005 ArchVoices Essay Competition (see page 500), where entrants were asked to reflect on the engagement of contemporary architectural practice with the general public. She is currently working toward an MArch degree at the University of British Columbia, focusing her design thesis on the inner suburban strip. She received a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and anthropology from Swarthmore College and became interested in architecture after interning at Metropolis magazine.

Considering the oft-quoted statistic that architects are involved in a paltry 5 percent of building in North America, one would almost have to conclude that not only has the field of architecture been marginalized by external forces, but it has actively contributed to its own marginalization. If the latter is in fact the case, many factors contribute to this state of affairs, but the most fundamental is a denial of the dominant built fabric of the contemporary metropolis as "city," and therefore the concern of the architectural profession. Driving through a landscape of strip malls, big boxes, and subdivisions, very little well-crafted building grabs the eye. Thumbing through an architectural journal, very little of the territory of the suburb jumps out, as the central concern of practitioners remains in the city center. Denying the places where most people live and work as a meaningful preoccupation can't help but alienate those people from the practice of architecture. From the perspective of those on the periphery of practice, i.e., most people, architecture is thought of as the rarefied province of cities hungrily seeking the Bilbao effect, if it is thought about at all.

Under the aegis of post-modern urbanism, and even more recently through the emerging construct of landscape urbanism, some theoreticians have begun to think through urban praxis differently, a first step toward communicating that everyday surroundings should comprise the domain of design. Accepting and even embracing the post-industrial landscape as a field pulsing with the latent potential of urban systems that might refashion the built environment, this school of thought devalues the conventional desire to operate on a greenfield blank slate. This is no accident, as urban spread will inevitably render the greenfield a thing of the past. From different positions, this theoretical approach and the concerns of people outside the profession pull architecture toward the vast middle ground stretching from the 19th-century urban core to the rural fringe. Young practitioners can play a pivotal role in staking out this territory, rather than luxury showcases, as a central concern of the design professions. In so doing, contact, and by extension engagement, with the general public would be

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fostered as widespread versions of daily life would become a common point of concern. Just as the hierarchy of center and periphery might be flattened into a more evenly grained field, the hierarchy of professional, client, and public might be tempered through the multiplication of points of contact.

Despite theoretical leanings in this direction, that goal poses a seemingly insurmountable challenge to young practitioners as current development forces persist. Though architects have at times adopted radical *avant-garde* positions, it can be extremely challenging to carry those out when projects are typically built in response to client initiative. This would seem to suggest that demand must be manipulated to request an alternative, but that situates the architect as social engineer, once again reserving power for the marginal elite. Rather than manipulating the uneducated masses to demand the production of the visionary architect, it would be far more fruitful to engage in dialogue that raises the awareness that for every ingrained typology and production methodology, alternatives exist. That the built environment is highly malleable as it has, embodied shifting social, political, and economic currents and will continue to do so. Neither the downtown core nor the suburbs, neither the office park nor the strip mall are an inevitable outcome of unalterable forces of development. Heightening awareness of this complex reality could offer people a radically new perception of their surroundings in which they become powerful actors rather than passive inhabitants.

Still, that possibility seems farfetched. But academia, where students have the luxury of reflecting on the built environment outside of status quo client demands, can further foster interrogation of the aspirations of architectural practice. Having considered whether architecture should remain elite, potentially rendering itself obsolete, or whether it should reengage with everyday building, students might reposition their role as they enter the professional world. Design studios present the perfect place to frame alternatives to the frequent fascination with the urban gallery space or the rural retreat, positing a role for carefully considered design in the developer-driven middle ground where architects have been edged out or were never invited in to begin with.

Equally important to this reconstruction of program and site priorities is a reconstruction of the methodological response. Rather than measuring dimensions, either at the physical site or the most readily accessible GIS site, students might begin to construct the context for their interventions through a greater understanding of the underlying social, political, economic, and ecological systems. This would require a much deeper interrogation of a given site, demanding contact with many different constituents, whether surrounding residents, local politicians, or the storm sewer. Though a full grasp of these systems might be an overly ambitious goal for a studio semester,

establishing an active interest in aspects of them would lay the groundwork for developing a greater understanding of the context in which architecture operates as well as encouraging emerging architects to engage with the public as an implicit part of their practice. Frequent interaction with the public might elicit an enlivened interest in the role of architecture, as it begins to be seen as an active ingredient in development.

With an eye to improving business, a pawnshop owner in a dying strip mall welcomed the idea of architectural intervention as I proposed a merely theoretical thesis project. Recognizing the inadequate lighting and signage and the relative inaction of the management, he embraced the enhanced visibility he inferred as a result of architectural attention. On the other hand, the bartender serving the afternoon regulars at the strip mall's Chinese-American restaurant had no interest in speaking to me after I mentioned the potential project. This response, as well as the less hostile but equally disinterested responses of the part-time workers in most of the other stores, serves to temper any naïve idealism about latent public interest in architecture. However, the few positive responses suggest that merely broaching the topic could initiate far broader public participation in shaping the built environment than is currently manifest.

Just as design-build is gaining ground as a way for architects to expand their role in the building economy, development-design might offer a promising avenue for extending publicly engaged practice beyond school. Rather than accepting defeat in the face of unabated conventional suburban development, architects might obtain parcels of land, whether greenfield or greyfield, to explore new typologies. Rather than accepting that they are beholden to market demand as construed by targeted surveys, architects might engage in their own surveying methods, uncovering a different type of demand. It is telling that in the first round of post-World War II suburban development many new homeowners, driven by the need to obtain affordable, efficient housing, found other desires underserved by their cul-de-sac homes.

Delores Hayden offers a perspective tempering this post-war panacea, "The sitcom suburbs offered the cheapest housing available in the postwar years. However inconvenient, however remote from railroad stations or bus routes, families coped with them because they had few other choices. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, not everyone did own a car. Men sometimes carpooled to work. Women walked to shops if they could or begged a ride from a neighbor. Because of dispersed houses, the demand for cars rose, including the demand for second cars and the market for used cars." (Hayden, p.161) Similarly now, affordability trumps all, potentially leaving many other desires unheeded, in spite of the conventional wisdom concerning the American desire for a private lawn. If architects engage in field work as they enter the field, they might

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find ways to achieve affordability as they develop, design, and build while considering a broad scope of public desires unearthed through multiple dialogues.

Making inroads into the predominantly greenfield territory of large, well-financed developers remains a tall order, so adopting the conventionally less desirable but culturally more challenging sites left in those developers' lengthening wake may be more realistic. As strip malls decline and die and cheaply built ranch houses deteriorate, they may provide a fruitful territory for emerging architects to test a more engaged methodology, bringing their education to bear on the economic and social issues identified by pockets of people afloat amidst this urban aggregate. Though younger architects may be uniquely poised to take this risk intellectually, more established architects may be better positioned to take the risk financially. An ethic may emerge among those leaving school that suggests taking this on, but more mature architects attuned to pressing urban issues might just as readily adopt the challenge.

Any sector of the architectural profession that does challenge entrenched normative development patterns in a process that involves the public will likely find that their expenditure of resources, time, and effort is repaid and exceeded by mounting interest in architecture as a tool in everyday life. This awareness could foster a much higher demand for the thoughtful, rather than merely expedient, articulation of spaces for a continually increasing urban population. Though fraught with stumbling blocks, this could become a win-win situation in which architects find themselves in higher demand and multiple publics find their lifestyles better accommodated by a reshaped built environment. At the same time, both might find the experience of their immediate and distant urban surroundings far more pleasurable.

If carefully crafted design were to infiltrate large and small pieces of the built fabric, popping up in the ageing subdivision, the gas station, and the freeway off-ramp, the architectural profession might find itself operating on a scale unprecedented in North America. Architects have no absolute responsibility to engage the general public, but in so doing they might first and foremost fulfill a responsibility to themselves, addressing an innate desire to expand their opportunity to practice. Architects espousing vastly divergent ideologies might be able to commonly support an architectural version of the Hippocratic Oath, which would charge thoughtful design with supplanting rudimentary building to the greatest extent possible.

Reference: Delores Hayden. Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.