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Insurgent Architecture
An Alternative Approach to Design-Build

This ongoing experiment in community-based, design-build pedagogy tests the deployment of direct action as a form of ''insurgent architecture.'' Through this we are developing strategies for design practices to mesh more productively with the everyday life of a recovering New Orleans neighborhood. While addressing both social and educational demands, this project also explores an alternative approach to architectural practice.

Overview

In their February 2002 JAE article ''Designing/Building/Learning,'' Jori Erdman and Robert Weddle observe that while ''hands-on approaches to pedagogy in the form of full-scale construction exercises have emerged in schools across the country. . . these activities continue to resist theorizing.'' They speculate that the term ''design-build'' itself is perhaps inappropriate, concluding that: ''For many practitioners, design-build is viewed simply as an alternative means of project delivery. The theme of 'building speculations' seems to offer a more open and critical definition of the topic and attempts to recognize the necessity of the reflective component of pedagogical exercises.''[1]

In the years since that article was published, academic practices involved with full-scale explorations of real materials have tended to follow one of two paths. Many of the more established programs have continued to focus on the construction of houses or other relatively large projects. Programs of this kind, like Kansas's Studio 804 or Tulane's Urban Build, have tended to emulate the professional practices of their directors, and to construe ''building speculation'' primarily as the investigation of building systems like modular or panelized construction.[2] These practices are noteworthy for both their high quality design and community service, but because of the overriding demands of constructing complex structures in short time frames, they cannot devote too much attention to more open-ended speculation. Other programs, often dedicated to the exploration of new materials and processes, give a strong bias to individual students' direct investigation of the nature of craft and materials, but rarely do these projects address public issues or community needs. Often the results of these more speculative practices take the form of art installations or interior design elements.[3] While both of these trends mark significant departures from traditional studio-based design education, it is still an open question whether these might constitute truly ''alternative'' models for practice.

The projects illustrated here are all part of an ongoing exploration of a unique approach to design-build pedagogy. The work has been described as ''guerilla architecture,'' defined as ''small-scale interventions in the social and urban landscape. . . intended as an immediate and inexpensive way of satisfying the needs of a specific group.''[4] Over the course of five semesters students have designed and tested a wide array of objects and interventions, ranging from furniture to gardens, T-shirts to notice boards, in collaboration with residents of the Seventh Ward. In the process, the students have enriched their notions of design in the public realm, and enlarged the scope of what might constitute architectural practice.

Project Description

This work began when we decided that we wanted to do something to help New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. With assistance from the Tulane City Center, we were paired with a fledgling community organization, and together we set about deciding what we would do. It was perhaps inevitable that we would start something unorthodox: New Orleans's unprecedented experience, as a city needing massive rebuilding—and our shop location some thousand miles away—forced innovative thinking as to how we could best collaborate with the residents of the Seventh Ward (Figure 1). Looking back over the work of the past three years, everyone is keenly aware of the benefits of the shared sense of urgency and purpose—a sense that propelled both design team members and neighborhood partners into action, and buoyed our sense of purpose and willingness to take risks.[5]

We each (client and design team) had a sort of shared birth: as we were imagining a new kind of academic design build program, they were looking for ways to create a group dedicated to enhancing neighborhood cohesiveness through the cultural arts. During early conversations about shared values and outlook, a name for their neighborhood group emerged: ''The Porch.'' Willie Birch, one of the leaders of the Porch, recounts how the naming of the organization led to a vision for the architecture and our task going forward: ''The name came out of a telephone conversation with. . . the two architects from the University of Kansas. We were talking about African retentions. And the porch kept coming up in that conversation in terms of an African addition to the European vernacular in terms of

1. View of community meeting, 2006. Despite working 1000 miles from our community partners, face to face dialogue is an important starting point for every project. (This and all subsequent images by Rob Corser and Nils Gore.)

architecture, and I said, 'That's the name!' And they said 'Yeah, the Porch,' and we all agreed. The name was the Porch. We talked about the significance of the kitchen and the porch was also the place that we all sat down every afternoon, particularly in the summer time.''[6] The first semester we built a series of Notice Boards (Figure 2) and the Shade Structure and Tool Shed in a new Community Garden (Figures 3 and 4) that served as the physical ''porch'' for community gathering and events until their current building was secured.

The subsequent projects have come about in similar, serendipitous ways, and everyone involved has had to work in an entrepreneurial, responsive manner. For instance, the set of Notice Boards that were built as an initial project were produced at a time when the city had limited services and there was a need for low-tech communication systems. The community responded by developing a poster project featuring the stories of some Seventh Ward residents. According to the organizers of that project: ''We wanted to build on the strength of our previous work to create a critical, collaborative ethnographic project that would give our neighborhood a voice in citywide dialogues (an alternative to planning meetings) and also provide an opportunity for residents to talk to each other about race and class, creativity and activism.''[7] The physical notice boards stimulated a community project that furthered the social objectives of the Porch, but it wasn't a planned activity at the outset. The poster project was developed as an opportunistic response to the presence of the boards. The Mobile Stage (Figure 5) was developed as a response to the establishment of a youth theater program in the neighborhood by New York University in collaboration with the Porch. The Outdoor Classroom (Figure 6) was developed as a response to the establishment of a summer arts program for neighborhood youth. A second Shade Structure came about when the Cooper Hewitt museum invited us to participate in the ''Design for the Other 90 Percent'' exhibit. In each case, as

funding and opportunity arose, the projects were developed as responses to an evolving agenda.

Critical Reflections

As we reflect on the work of the past three years, we are beginning to understand how this evolving experiment in academic design-build practice might differ from other such programs. Most obviously, the physical (not to mention social, economic and cultural) distance between the design team and our neighborhood partners has sponsored an acute awareness of the absolute need for clear communication and mutual understanding of expectations. Nothing can be taken for granted in this kind of relationship. This distance has also affected our design sensibility and research—favoring lightweight, deployable systems over site-built construction scenarios. A critical attitude toward scale has also emerged in which students have become more committed to seeking the greatest impact from the smallest interventions, the simplest strategies, and the most modest of means. The notice boards are a good example of how relatively small interventions can have a much larger impact than we imagined when we first conceived them. A quality of seriality has also emerged as an important alternative to the singularity of typical design interventions.

By virtue of this ongoing collaboration over the course of numerous semesters and with two different instructors, students have risen to the challenge of effectively inserting themselves into an ongoing dialog where they are responsible not only for responding to the client's immediate needs and particular culture, but also to the context of previous projects and with an expectation of projects to come after theirs. Finally, It is noteworthy that few academic design-build programs have yet to critically engage new digital fabrication technologies in community-service projects. While digital fabrication has not been the central focus of our research, new technologies have been employed to the extent that they support the larger exploration of ''insurgent architecture.'' The need for deploy-

ability, for example, has led us to use CNC fabrication largely for the extreme precision of fit that is crucial for systems that need to be assembled and disassembled repeatedly and with ease. Very precise jigs and fixtures have also been digitally produced for the accurate layout of steel fabrications, especially for hinged or movable systems. And most importantly, digital fabrication has underwritten the shared desire to make designs that are responsive to the context of Afro-Caribbean culture through built translations of framing and joinery systems as well as incised patterning and imagery.

What is emerging from these experiments is a new form of practice that we are calling ''insurgent architecture.'' In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey describes a theoretical political actor called ''the insurgent architect,'' who, ''in addition to the speculative imagination which he or she necessarily employs, . . . has available some special resources for critique, resources from which to generate alternative visions as to what might be possible.''[8] Harvey emphasizes that the insurgent architect has the ability to create both practical tools for, and utopian visions of, new social realities by understanding the importance of rule-making and rule-breaking.

It is a provisional working method, subject to changing tactics that are always aimed at meshing more productively with the everyday life of neighborhood residents. The design process is not linear, and the products are not always architectural in a strict sense of the term (Figure 7). Rather than focusing on generating an overarching vision (in a master planning sense) or proposing long-term, on-site building projects, our distance from New Orleans has encouraged us to focus more on approaches that favor lightness, flexibility, and the ability to quickly change course in response to changing neighborhood dynamics and desires, fluctuating funding sources, academic calendars, and other unforeseeable circumstances. This tactical approach, without the benefit of physical proximity, makes our process a relatively unusual model for design assistance and design-build pedagogy.[9]

2. Notice Boards for Community Organizing. The notice boards were constructed by Nils Gore's studio immediately after Katrina for organizing and information distribution at a time when electricity and phone services were still sparse. They were placed around the neighborhood at strategic locations, and today function as a set of mobile community art galleries. The first pre-fabricated pieces, they became a test for our standard way of working at a distance of 1000 miles from the site: construct in our shop, disassemble and flat-pack in small trucks, reassemble in New Orleans. The Neighborhood Story Project at University of New Orleans participated in the project by making a series of posters featuring neighborhood residents as a community-building tool. To date, they have produced over thirty posters. (Completed February 2006.)

All of the projects were completed as part of upper level studios focusing on designing and building in close collaboration with members of the Porch Cultural Organization, and students were responsible for all communication, fundraising, design, fabrication, and installation of their interventions, as well as subsequent maintenance and repair of previous students' projects. The commitment to a single neighborhood and community partner inserts students into a rich social milieu and relates their work to that of others in a temporal continuum that challenges the singularity and hermetic focus that is too often the nature of architectural practice and design-build pedagogy. While the term ''guerilla architecture'' strikes us as too revolutionary, we are learning that ''insurgent architecture,'' with its focus on direct action in the built environment in service of both education and community enrichment, is a unique and promising model for academic design-build practice.

3. Community Garden for gathering, recreation and profit. Students and residents worked together to determine the best way to achieve the shared goal of creating a new community gathering space with functional storage for tools and equipment. Students raised money and secured material donations for construction of a tool shed and shade structure within the community garden.

4. For the Shade Structure, Rob Corser's students adapted vernacular wood framing and developed the construction system for digital fabrication processes using marine plywood. For the Tool Shed, Nils Gore's students examined African precedents as they designed the steel-framed, wood-skinned box. Today, the community uses the garden for personal use and has developed a for-profit organic herb garden for produce sales to local restaurants. (Completed May 2006.)

Notes

1. Jori Erdman and Robert Weddle, ''Designing, Building, Learning,'' *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 3 (2002): 174–79.

2. For Studio 804 and Dan Rockhill, see www.studio804.com and www.rockhillandassociates.com; for Urban Build and Byron Mouton, see www.tulaneurbanbuild.com and www.bildit.com.

3. For examples see Lisa Iwamoto, ''Translations: Fabricating Space,'' *Journal of Architectural Education* 58, no. 1 (2004): 35–38; and Luis Eduardo Boza,''(Un)Intended Discoveries: Crafting the Design Process,'' *Journal of Architectural Education* 60, no. 2 (2006): 4–7.

4. Anthony Fontenot, ''Reinventing New Orleans,'' in *DOMUS* (Milan: Casa Editore, vol. 905, July–August, 2007), pp. 95–99.

5. It is one of the aspects of this project that seems truly unique to the post-Katrina situation (or perhaps it is common to post-disaster scenarios in general), and that poses an important question concerning the ultimate transferability of the lessons of this project: how will the techniques explored here translate to the lower profile but equally demanding call for community-based participatory design-build projects in our own back yards?

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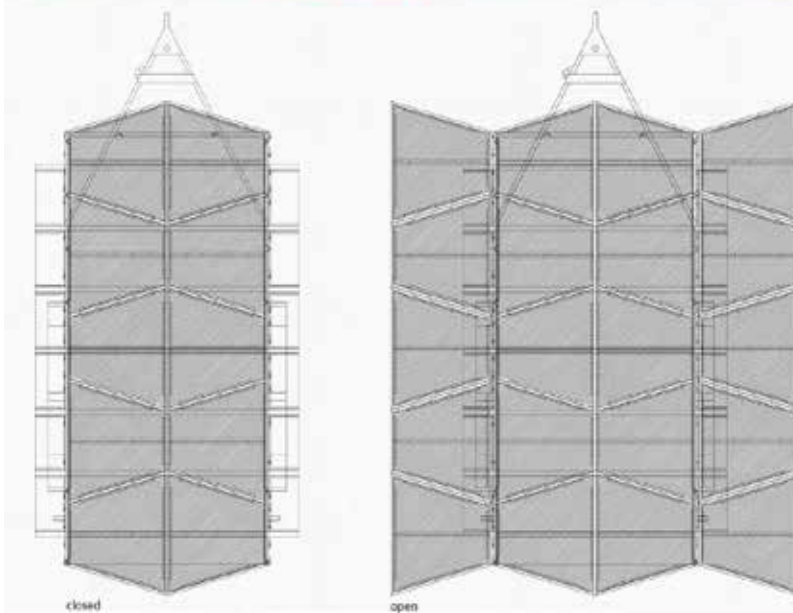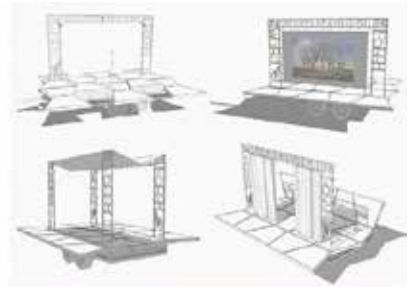
5. Mobile Stage for cultural performances and children's education. Having received interest from a university theater program to assist with a children's theater program, the community organization requested that we design and build a Mobile Stage that could be used at the Center, or deployed throughout the neighborhood for cultural events. Using a pre-existing utility trailer, Nils Gore's studio built a stage with "flaps" that could be closed for transport, or opened to make a 13′ x16′ stage. The "proscenium" structure is designed to accommodate a variety of backdrops, lighting scenarios, and overhead enclosures. The inherent flexibility of the stage allows it to be used for music, theater, parades, puppet shows, or movie projections. Recently they have been renting it out to generate revenue for the Center. (Completed January 2007.)

6. See http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2008/ 07/the_porch_a_cul.php (accessed September 2, 2008).

7. Rachel Breunlin and Helen Regis, coauthors of the Neighborhood Poster Project. This quotation is from their paper, "Creativity and Activism: Toward a Critical-Collaborative Ethnography," presented at the 107th American Anthropological Association meeting in November 2008.

8. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 237–38. When Harvey uses the term "insurgent architect" he is speaking metaphorically. Obviously, no metaphor is required in our case.

9. For a more fully developed paper on the idea of insurgent architecture, see Robert Corser and Nils Gore, "Insurgent Architecture in the Seventh Ward," *Batture: Amnesiascope, Volume 4* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), pp. 4–11.
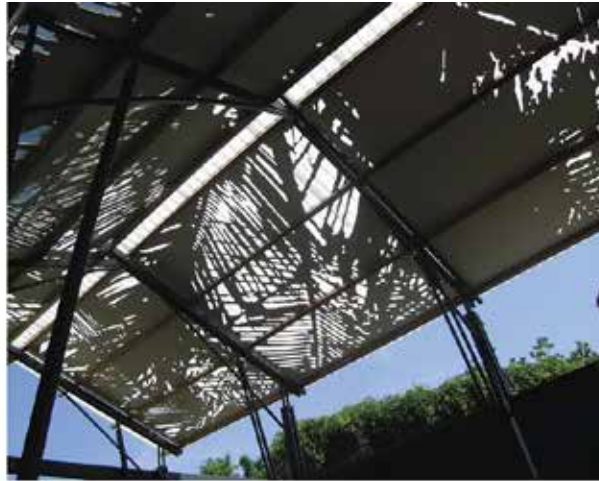
6. Outdoor Classroom for cultural activities and art education. After two summers of a successful children's summer art program, Nils Gore's studio constructed an Outdoor Classroom in a narrow space tucked between the Center and a neighboring building. It is constructed of steel framing and a CNC pattern-cut roof structure to provide simultaneous shade and filtered daylighting. The pattern was digitally derived from an image taken looking up into a palm tree. It has a bank of slate chalkboards along one side, and benches along both sides. In addition to classroom use, it has been used recently for protection of the grills during community cookouts. (Completed May 2007.)

7. Flexible Furnishings for the community center. After moving in to the Community Center, there was a need for furnishings to accommodate a variety of activities: benches and tables, shelves and storage, an indoor stage for performances in inclement weather. This furniture system is digitally fabricated of marine plywood and Lexan. Rob Corser's studio designed it to be easily reconfigured to serve a wide range of functions, while also remaining open to new uses and encouraging improvisation by the users. (Completed May 2008.)