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Taking "Engagement" Seriously: Mobilizing Community for Better Parks and Public Health

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ABSTRACT

This paper will describe theories behind, and approaches to, engaging with community members to improve park environments, thus encouraging a sense of ownership, and more regular use by stakeholders. Studies have shown that park design elements and amenities contribute to better public health.[1] These include both quantitative and qualitative assessments, revealing that the design quality of parks and park elements matters.[2] Others have shown that urban park quality has a positive effect on nearby property values and rental rates.[3]

Many of the parks in Wyandotte County have been underfunded and neglected in recent decades. Sidewalks and lighting are broken or non-existent, toilet facilities are non-existent or closed, bike racks, benches and picnic tables are likewise too few in number or have been neglected to the point of non-usability.

In a pilot project, the Healthy Parks Initiative, five community mobilizers were hired through local Neighborhood Business Revitalization (NBR) organizations to represent the interests of five public parks. These mobilizers are community residents and geographically centered to understand complex and subtle issues surrounding each

park neighborhood. By training and working with the mobilizers, who are organizing walking clubs and other park activities, and committing to use the parks on a regular basis with other stakeholders, we are systematically collecting knowledge about park and neighborhood conditions, and transferring that knowledge to the design process for park improvements.

MEANING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Ours is an approach to urbanism that finds its meaning in everyday life by finding insight through residents and the ordinary and banal routines they commonly experience. Everyday life is a repository of a richness of meanings, reconnecting human and social meanings within the built environment.[4] The physical domain of everyday public activity is made meaningful by revealing and investigating the social possibilities revealed by the patterns of everyday life. Margaret Crawford, in her book *Everyday Urbanism*, relates "everyday space is often described as generic and generalizable. But, once you closely observe the people (and we believe engage the people) who inhabit it and the activities that take place there, it becomes highly specific. Thus, everyday urban design is situational and specific, responding to very particular circumstances."[5] Our approach to design in such spaces is one that seeks to transform existing situations into improved everyday life. The process reveals a complex network of connected, situational "truths." Building upon this idea of building relationships through common experiences, Alejandro Aravena, the curator of the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, *Reporting From the Front*, introduced the theme of the exhibition with:

> *"We believe that the advancement of architecture is not a goal in itself but a way to improve people's quality of life. Given life ranges from very basic physical needs to the most intangible dimensions of the human condition, consequently, improving the quality of the built environment is an endeavor that has to tackle many fronts: from guaranteeing very concrete, down-to-earth living standards to interpreting and fulfilling human desires, from respecting the single individual to taking care of the common good, from efficiently hosting daily activities to expanding the frontiers of civilization."*

Known for the reach of his practice in Chile, working for both elite, institutional clients as well as the desperately poor, Aravena called for Biennale projects focusing attention on "issues like segregation, inequalities, peripheries, access to sanitation, natural disasters, housing shortage, migration, informality, crime, traffic, waste, pollution and ***participation of communities***."[7] (emphasis ours) The Exhibition includes 63 national participants who were called upon "to investigate more explicitly whether and where there are any trends going in … the direction of renewal."[8] President Paolo Baratta stated, "We are not interested in architecture as the manifestation of a formal style, but rather as an instrument of *self-government*, of humanist civilization, and as a demonstration of the ability of humans to become masters of their own destinies…Architecture in action as an instrument of social and political life, challenges us to assess the public consequences of private actions at a more fundamental level…. (W)e need to engage with the public and with all possible stakeholders in the decisions and actions whereby our living spaces are created, both as individuals and as communities. As Architecture is the most political of all the arts—concluded the President—"the Biennale Architettura must recognize this."[9]

MEANING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Immediately after the exhibition's opening, reports from the Biennale on social media and in online publications targeted the USA pavilion for criticism, faulting much of the work for being superficially formalistic, and arguing that it insufficiently represented the interests of a broad range of Detroiters. (*Fig. 01*) *Detroit Resists*, "a coalition of activists, artists, architects, and community members working on behalf of an inclusive, equitable, and democratic city," argued in a press release that the work exhibited "indifference to its political context," and that "the U.S. Pavilion, precisely as an attempt to advocate 'the power of architecture,' is structurally unable to engage this (urban) catastrophe and will thereby collaborate in the ongoing destruction of the city."[10]

A back-and-forth between Detroit Resists and the US exhibition's curators ensued in the media, leading to no real settlement, but serving rather, in our mind, to highlight the

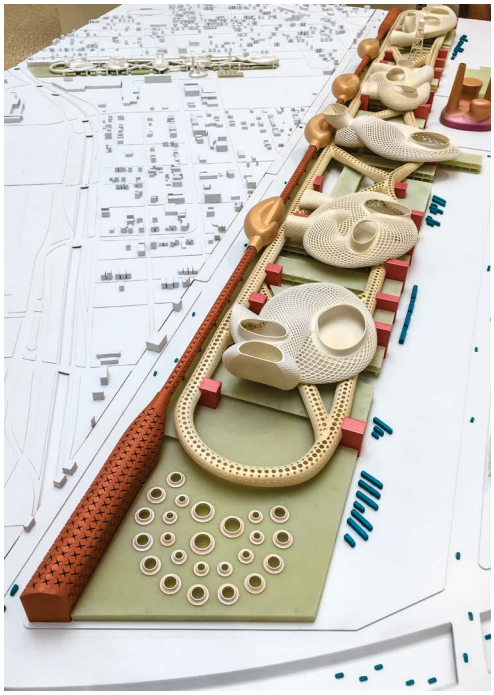

Figure 1: Image of project at USA pavilion, Venice Biennale. 2016. Photo: Nils Gore

bubble that many elite architects work inside of. In the US exhibit, they presented no real background, training, knowledge, or tools for engaging the diverse constituencies who live and work in all cities, and who have a bona fide stake in the future of those cities—not just the ruling class of political/business decision makers typically employing those architects. Simply put, most architects have never been trained to do community engagement; sadly, it's not a normative part of professional practice. It should be no surprise that it didn't occur in this case—especially considering that, with one exception, the architects selected to present at the Biennale weren't actually from Detroit, but tended primarily to be from urban and academic centers on the coasts.[11] What is positive, is that we are entering a new place where humanitarian architecture is honored and focused as a place for dialogue. But it also reveals that insufficient community engagement is a problem existing everywhere in our profession, not just in Detroit. This instance merely brought it to the world's attention through the media hype surrounding the Biennale. The question going forward is, what can we learn from this experience?

NEED FOR A MORE COMPLEX UNDERSTANDING

The roots of social problems are not easily revealed in the surface. Within communities, good health results from the interplay of many factors only some of which are within an individual's control. (*Fig. 02*) "More than one-half of what determines a person's health outcomes results from influences in the social and built environments."[12] There is an uneven distribution of health outcomes across the country that are demonstrated through a high degree between geographic overlap between poor health outcomes and neighborhoods with limited resources. These are commonly referred to as the

Social Determinants of Health. "Historical maps and documents provide evidence of long-term neighborhood disinvestment rooted in discriminatory housing policy, spanning decades. Not surprisingly, these historically disinvested neighborhoods are the same areas that today experience the worst health outcomes."[13]

As in most American cities in the 1930's, residents of Kansas City and Wyandotte County suffered great economic loss during the Great Depression. Home foreclosures were common at that time and as a result the federal government created the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC).[14] HOLC developed an assessment process whereby assessors evaluated neighborhoods and rated them in an increasing order

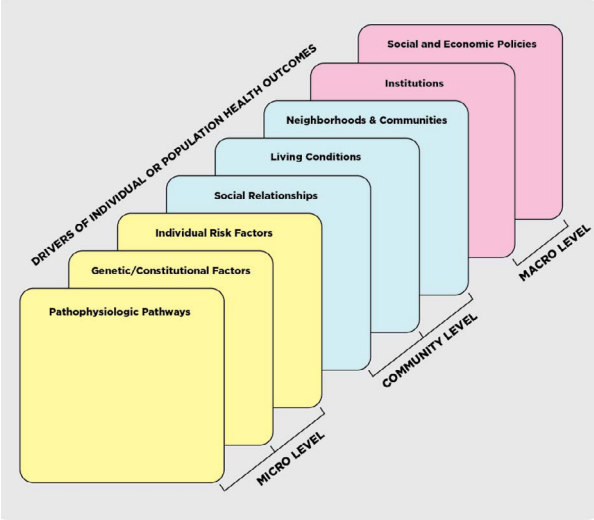

Figure 2: Individual and population health is determined by the aggregate of multiple individual, environmental, and social factors.

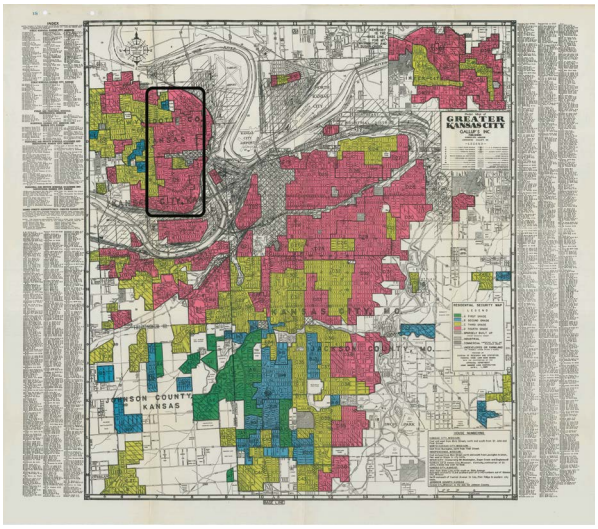

Figure 3: "Redlining" map of the Greater Kansas City area created by the federal government's Home Owner's Loan Corporation in the 1930's. Our area of focus is indicated by the rectangle at upper left.

of their insurance risk. Maps were developed with a four-scale rating, the highest risk was "redlined" and considered "hazardous." (*Fig. 03*) These redlined zones most commonly represented the highest percentage of "Blacks in the neighborhood, singling out the presence of Blacks in a neighborhood as particularly harmful to property values and the overall likelihood for loan repayment." The resulting impact of these assessments about the people who lived in the homes to be refinanced—or in the case of

"red-lined" neighborhoods, not being refinanced—was devastating. These evidences can be physically seen in many neighborhoods today with deteriorating and removed homes, poorly maintained infrastructure (street lighting, sidewalks, landscaping, storm water collection, etc.) and deteriorating public parks with little amenities. The impacts are palpable in the built environment. (*Fig. 04*)

Figure 4: Images of typical housing and neighborhood degradation in Kansas City, KS. Photos credit: Jodi Gore.

SPATIAL AGENCY

So, how can an architect begin to address these spaces of disinvestment? In *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*, the authors Awan, Schneider and Till identify the phrase *Spatial Agency*: "Spatial does not so much replace architectural as a term, but radically expands it…social space explicitly acknowledges the contribution of others, and with this dismisses the notion of expert authorship that the professions still cling to."[15] Social space is charged with the dynamics of power and empowerment and embodied with a future social relationship, "not merely as a harbinger of aesthetics or as an instruction to a contractor."[16] The spaces are not neutral, but instead deploy the potential and knowledge of architectural processes to support our community partners to explore the possibilities of space and to take control of the space they currently inhabit.

MOBILIZING COMMUNITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement can mean many things to many people. For our general purposes, "(c)ommunity engagement refers to the ***process*** by which ***community benefit organizations*** and individuals build ***ongoing, permanent relationships*** for the purpose of applying a ***collective vision*** for the ***benefit of a community***."[17] The salient principles embedded in this definition are those that we have bolded in the description above, indicating self-determination in an evolving process over a long period of time. Furthermore, for our particular purpose in seeking to improve the built environment for public health benefit, we look to the model of engagement provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which has as one of its goals the notion of community engagement "grounded in the principles of community organization: fairness, justice, empowerment, participation, and self-determination."[18]

Figure 5 shows a range of engagement tactics and the associated efficacy that one could potentially achieve through the different levels. (*Fig. 05*) The levels are *Outreach, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Shared Leadership*. In our experience, each level has its place in the lifespan of a project, and is important in the establishment of trust and the

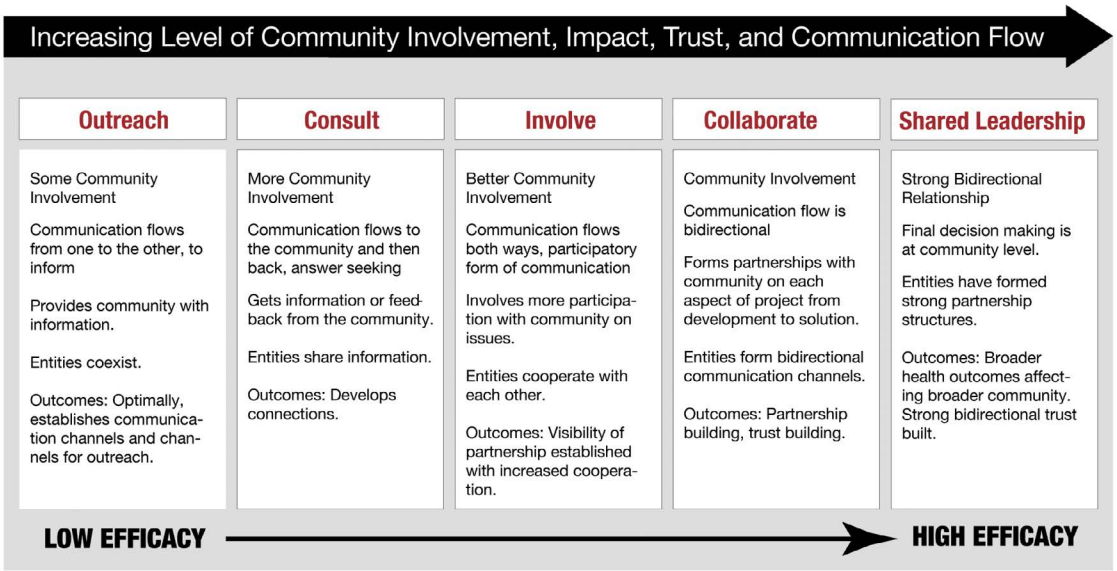

Figure 5: The relationship between levels of community engagement and associated efficacy for change, dependent on degree of real community involvement.

development of collaborative working methods that all successful projects have. The key is to know what to expect—and what not to expect—from each tactic, and to strive for the goal of Shared Leadership, for therein lies the promise of highest efficacy and impact. It's important to recognize that not all projects proceed all the way to the end, but in general we find that the natural evolution from outreach and through the intermediate levels to shared leadership is a worthy goal to pursue. "Over time, a specific collaboration is likely to move along this continuum toward greater community involvement, and any given collaboration is likely to evolve in other ways, too. Most notably, while community engagement may be achieved during a time-limited project, it frequently involves—and often evolves into—long-term partnerships that move from the traditional focus on a single health issue to address a range of social, economic, political, and environmental factors that affect health."[19] Projects are able to evolve in complex ways, thus gaining buy-in from multiple partners and citizens, and leveraging those relationships to increase the likelihood of success.

SPATIAL AGENCY

> *"Increasingly, people across the globe are engaging in improving the urban environments they live in. They act in response to urgent issues and compelling needs such as shelter, security, employment, health and education. Community-based initiatives indicate the ability of citizens to present solutions to challenges posed by everyday life, and use creativity to transform and multiply existing resources. Inadvertently political by nature, these initiatives are a response to the incapability of today's cities to cope with urban challenges via traditional planning culture and its instruments. They invite different actors to cooperate towards a new urban scheme driven by participation and a proactive attitude. They build collective space, collectively. They reveal a shared layer of the city that is complex, incremental and difficult to articulate, as it does not organize systems, but rather operates on a local level fulfilling micro-agendas through direct action."*[20]

We are in a unique position to be both educators and practitioners when we place our students and ourselves in community spaces. We move between these two roles, prioritizing the interests and needs of everyday people seeking co-created solutions to spatial

problems. The shifting function of the user from a state of passivity to one of engagement delivers a new promise for the social role of design. Notions of inclusion, authorship and decision-making bring the user and the practitioner closer to level playing fields.

This approach is a collaborative one in which agents act with, and on behalf of, others. We build on the concept of *citizen expert/expert citizen* by placing our students in places where such exchanges can be recognized and valued as basic to the development of our work.[21] Our inquiries as students and academics allow us into spaces where we are perceived as non-predatory, and can establish these spaces of exchange. In these spaces students learn to challenge their preconceptions as they sit at the table with citizen experts, made highly visible and forced into open dialogue, in real conversations where jargon is awkward. This direct exchange triggers a new sense of responsibility for the interpretations and translation of information where the 'expert-citizen' position is equal to the 'citizen-expert.' This participatory approach to making requires an indeterminate approach, where we learn by doing, working face-to-face, where all participants are driving our approach to the production of space and form. Students and community members find confidence in the roles they can play in the production of doing. They learn from each other, becoming active producers of space working with local needs, capacities and potential capabilities to transfer the work in direct ways—ones where "small bets" can be of little risk and can have great impact. By involving all interested parties, communication flows both ways and entities cooperate with each other.

SMALL BETS

Through participatory processes, community residents and advocates are seeing new ideas and fresh responses to spaces in the city they hadn't considered before. Questions about private ownership, policy and rights to public spaces have been raised. New conversations about possibilities have been made. Students have been given agency in addressing community life through resident opinion in ways that they typically don't in traditional classroom settings. Residents have been given agency to see their community spaces in ways that they typically don't. These new practices that seek to explore new

power relations and challenge private claims to space have generated new directions in how to occupy public spaces. New tactics and strategies that use existing policies and buildings for purposes other than those they were designed for are possible. 'What if' possibilities are made visible and available through collaboration between expert-citizens (design students/professors) and citizen-experts.

By partnering, it has afforded us the capacity to strategically understand the underlying social determinants of health and target specific needs. Through this partnership, we have identified both strategic, systemic means of understanding how to operate, and tactical, directed means to generate incremental changes. We bring our disciplinary design thinking processes and capacities to visualize and translate data and narratives into new forms of knowledge and its dissemination. Students have been able to identify and assess building and public space needs, directed by conversations with neighborhood leadership and resident opinion. New forms of knowledge are created through outreach, where communication flows from one to the other and through representative means, and the community is provided with new forms of information in community-created spaces. Outreach happens in the informal spaces (i.e., an interactive table at the end of a community-organized parade) with our community partners. This sort of interactive space is less intimidating, where familiar community faces, within already established networks, allow us to capture 'insider' information. It is a form of consulting where communication flows to the community and then back, where connections are developed and information is shared in a familiar way.

COLLECTIVE ACTION

What is the best way to approach the work? In these places lack of investment fosters lack of interest and perceptions of danger for ones' personal safety. The City Parks & Recreation Department—advised by the police, fearing vagrancy and illicit activity—doesn't encourage people to 'linger' in parks leading to a decline in such things as benches and other everyday amenities that would encourage use. It is a vicious cycle of disinterest and decline.

If we are to work towards eliminating barriers to achieving full health potential for communities, then understanding the potential of parks and their impact on resident health is critical to understand and respond to. It became imperative that our design process and findings be made visible so that we could identify the top set of parks and projects to work on, involving a variety of stakeholders. This work generates a special kind of interpersonal "joint commitment" where each participant contributes.

Through numerous engagement events and participation in community advocacy and civic meetings, we gathered insight from as many residents, community advocates and civic representatives as possible at various events to gain their perspectives on the spaces they value most and that have greatest impact (good and bad). In a process that took several months, we could discern what parks had the most interest and support to engage volunteers for future uses and events. We learned that data becomes visual and that there is power in a shared idea, through 'concept maps' recognizable as products of the stakeholders' (expert-citizens), but crafted and made evident by those with capacity to design and distribute (citizen-experts).

ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

As we have been learning how to best engage the community in a variety of locations, we have developed a set of basic engagement tools: pop-up panels and map-cart, the Mobile Collaboratory (moCOLAB) and Dotte Agency (donated storefront building). The six pop-up panels and map-cart were developed to be used in a variety of settings: at place-based meetings where the displayed content helps to illustrate the findings, proposals and set within the space itself with community members. The proximity allows us the capacity to look at the existing space and make comparisons and discoveries with stakeholders. The pop-up panels have been deployed in church basements, community centers, city halls, public libraries and the like. We attempt to create focus group discussions and individual conversations around these panels in settings that others have created—in their place, in their time, within their networks. The principle behind them is *meet the people where they are*. (*Fig. 06*)

Figure 6: Pop-up engagement panels and map cart in action at Bethany Park in Kansas City, KS. Photo credits, from top: Nils Gore, Matt Kleinmann.

Figure 7: Mobile Collaboratory in action in Kansas City, KS. Photo credits, from top: Matt Kleinmann, Shannon Criss.

The Mobile Collaboratory (moCOLAB) is a 31' long Airstream trailer that was renovated and adapted by a class of students to be a 'community room' on wheels—taking scholars and students to the people to support needs and make connections that foster design-thinking in collaborative processes where an inclusive event incorporates all talents and perspectives towards a shared result. This has been delivered to a variety of spaces—again, where community stakeholders have made their community available through their orchestrated events, within their networks and where we are able to draw them in to capture their stories and share information for feedback. The Airstream creates a kind of spectacle at public events, capitalizing on the principle of *draw people in*. (*Fig. 07*)

The Dotte Agency storefront is a space that has been made available for our work through a particular community partner, Community Housing for Wyandotte County. Through their generosity we were invited to reside in a storefront space that they weren't using and unable to rent. With sweat equity and minor investment we are able to operate out of this central location practically free of charge. We have given many keys

away to various 'public good' partners to use for various meetings and exhibits. This space has served as an important intersection for extended dialogue where ideas emerge that are provocative and out-of-the-box—where every idea has merit. (*Fig. 08*) By gathering diverse minds and perspectives focused on a given situation, a range of ideas is established and serves to identify next-steps for a community group to take, with partnerships identifies and in place proximate to this location. There's a lot of good ideas to be shared and tested— providing alternate ways of thinking and implementing ideas in real places, "the alternative values and working methods are developed on the boundaries where the work engages the community."[22]

Figure 8: Meeting at Dotte Agency in Kansas City, KS. Photo: Matt Kleinmann.

Through support of local foundations, we have hired Park Mobilizers for five of the essential parks in the network of parks outlined—to be able to connect to residents encouraging regular use of the park and the capacity to determine insight about the assets and challenges of the built environment. With this effort, each park has been able to encourage neighboring residents to meet 2-3 times per week to walk together, building

a social network to support capacity for a healthy lifestyle for individuals together. Since this effort was started last April, we've seen a growth of number of walkers in each park—directly involved in the walking clubs and independently. In addition to the adding programming, we've created pocket maps to encourage the mobilizers to gather insight on the needs of the park and nearby public walkability and neighboring properties. Clean-up events, 5K runs, health fairs and other related programs are contributing to this unified effort.

Other related needs have arisen to further extend the capacity of the work:

—the need to communicate effectively with those associated with the network through a new WALK-WYCO text-share program we developed;

—the need to communicate shared, planned events through fliers, postcards, newsletters that we have designed and distributed directly and through others' websites;

—the need to capture stories about changes walkers have made as a result of the regular walking through photographs, narratives and starting to tell through video story-telling;

—the need to continue to build other forms of communication to support bicycling networks through BIKE-WYCO texting program and signage/bike racks.

Our methods of building networks of programmed activities, communications and prototyping small installations has been developed through collaboration, where communication flow is bidirectional, and we have formed partnerships with community stakeholders on each aspect of the larger project from development to small incremental solutions. With this partnership building we have built visible trust.

PROTOTYPING BUILDS TRUST

Our professional architecture degree curriculum has a requirement for students to take a "materials and tectonics" design studio where part of the investigation has to take place with real materials at actual size. These projects vary widely, from the scale of a single

piece of furniture, to experiments with building assemblies, to small buildings installed for clients. Funding for projects also varies, coming in some cases from the students in the course to externally-funded client-driven projects. In every case the aim is for students to take a project from conception through to completion so they can see the implications of design decisions play out in real time. (The moCOLAB, described above, was one such project, completed before we began our work in KCK, but which has proven to be very useful for us in our work there.) For the work in KCK we've developed, with our partners, a concept of physical prototyping of proposed elements, with installation in the city for testing and resident feedback. (*Fig. 09*) By working back and forth, within the constraints of the site, working with people who will maintain the elements in the future, we truly become partners. Trust is built through the development of elements as progress is self-evident through the object. Elements prototyped so far include bike racks, trail markers, informational signage, benches, fitness stations, a mobile demonstration kitchen, store shelving to promote healthy food access in convenience stores, and bike-hacks to demonstrate other kinds of pedaled transportation for those without cars. By conceiving and describing them as prototypes—both to ourselves, our partners, other community stakeholders and residents—we are able to be slightly more experimental and gain advantage of user feedback for future prototypes and "final" elements. Research has shown that this concept works well as an instructional tool, for both students and our community.[23]

CONCLUSION

Counterintuitive to our profession we have learned the value of an indeterminate approach and one that requires tactical, incremental changes. Our collaborative efforts with individuals from the community that use the parks on daily basis have allowed us to work productively in informal spaces. Incorporating the idea of "agency" in how we see ourselves changes the nature of how we approach the work and the ways in which we engage others. This is an alternative approach that challenges our common impulse of seeking design solutions, but instead one that requires that we are "…able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific

process or state of affairs..."[24] A generation (or more) ago we were trained to believe that the architect should be the sole decision-maker—the very concept of professionalism in our culture is rooted in that notion.[25] A generation (or more) ago we were trained to believe that the architect should be the sole decision-maker—the very concept of professionalism in our culture is rooted in that notion. While this altered approach steps outside the norm of what is typically considered as "architecture," we believe that expanding an approach that mobilizes others, is collaborative, demonstrates change through prototyped 'small bets' and ultimately requires collective action to complete has greater capacity to make effective health outcomes in the build environment. The outcome of this work has demonstrated that much of what we do that has tangible impact is in fact intangible and relational. It is a different way of being an architect—one that is less inclined to suffer from myopic thinking and instead reciprocal, generous and a responsive design approach to pressing urban problems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work wouldn't take place without the dedicated participation of Matt Kleinmann, our founding partner at Dotte Agency, the hundreds of students who have participated in the work through classes and volunteerism, the individual efforts of numerous concerned citizens, and the focused attention and funding of many community partners, including: Community Housing of Wyandotte County; Community Health Council of Wyandotte County; Wyandotte County Health Foundation; Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City; NBC Community Development Corporation; Unified Government Department of Parks and Recreation; Central Avenue Betterment Association; Healthy Communities Wyandotte; 20/20/20 Movement; University of Kansas (KU) Public Health Department; KU Work Group for Community Health and Development; Latino Health for All Coalition; KU Center for Civic and Social Responsibility; KU School of Architecture, Design and Planning.

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[9]Ibid.

[10]https://detroitresists.org/2016/02/20/
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