

Still planning with the poor: community design centers keep up the good works

The Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development

Now in its twentieth year of operation under director Ron Shiffman, the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development (PICCED) is the oldest, one of the largest, and possibly the most influential community design center in the country. As a special institute program, the center enjoys the services of advanced students from Pratt's schools of architecture and planning, who enroll for one year's credit and are assigned to perform architectural and planning services for one of the center's non-profit clients. What makes Pratt unusual among university-affiliated CDCs is the large number of full-time design professionals—17, including architects—who make up the core of the center's staff and supervise the students. Although Pratt Institute assists the center with some capital monies, insurance, and incidental expenses, Shiffman and development officer Susan Brome must annually raise funds for staff salaries and overhead costs. Despite the recent loss of over \$300,000 in Federal grants and contracts, the center has been remarkably successful in this regard and is one of the few CDCs in the country to receive substantial ongoing support from private foundations (Ford, Rockefeller, Mott, and others), banks, and local and state government sources (the City's Department of Housing Preservation & Development and the New York State Council on the Arts).

With an annual budget close to \$800,000, PICCED carries out a wide range of participatory design projects for local development corporations and other community-based groups throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Shiffman sees the center as operating on three closely related levels. First, there is architectural and planning assistance to nearly 80 organizations in such areas as housing rehabilitation, neighborhood surveying, re-use of community facilities, and economic development. Second, the center works with these same client groups to increase their administrative skills and build coalitions among like-minded organizations all over the city. Third, PICCED monitors and evaluates city, state, and national urban programs and attempts to educate (Shiffman eschews the word "lobby") legislators on the real needs that exist at the local level. Several ongoing projects exemplify the kinds of assistance that the center regularly dispenses:

- Schematic design and the development of a fund-raising strategy for the gut rehabilitation of eight vacant rowhouses in the Longwood section of the South Bronx, an architecturally distinctive enclave that was recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Client: Longwood Historic District Community Association.
 - A planning study emphasizing housing stabilization and commercial revitalization within a 40-block area of East Flatbush, a racially mixed neighborhood in Brooklyn. Client: East Rutland Road Citizens and Merchants Development Corporation.
 - Preparation of schematic and working drawings, and supervision of construction on the conversion of three contiguous brownstones in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn into an environmental education center. Client: Magnolia Tree Earth Center.
 - Cost and design feasibility studies for the renovation of a commercial building in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood into a multi-purpose youth center. Client: Allied Cheslea Youth/Committee for a 19th Street Center.
 - All design and construction phases of the restoration at Weeksville, a collection of early 19th-century frame buildings on the site of Brooklyn's first black settlement. Client: Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History.
- In addition to these "hands-on" projects, an increasing amount of the center's time is spent researching the intricacies of governmental policy in low-income housing and neighborhood development. For example, PICCED has contracted with the City's Public Development Corporation to do a survey of small businesses and factories in Astoria, Queens. A joint grant from the New York Community Trust and the Fund for the City of New York last year enabled Shiffman to coordinate a recently published study on the impact that a Federal housing voucher program for low-income people would have on New York City's population. Shiffman contends that the largely critical conclusions of the report may have led to the center's loss of some Federal aid in 1982. Nevertheless, he feels that research projects such as this have significantly affected Federal housing policies, and he sees the report as a crucial component of PICCED's mandate to advocate on behalf of low-income communities. Toward this end Shiffman hopes that the center will soon receive a contract with the State of New York Mortgage Authority to develop easily understood brochures for residents in neighborhoods eligible for subsidized, low-cost mortgages.