

Crit
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Architecture's Alternative Vanguard

The Evolution of the Community Design Center

by Philip Arcidi

Twenty years ago, some of the best architectural critics were students. Their acumen was one of conscience, more than the eye; their voice was loud and convincing. Students recognized that the poor had hardly been helped by the architectural profession, and convinced the 1969 AIA convention to pledge \$15 million to help urban minorities. Taylor Culver, President of the Student Chapters of the AIA (the precursor to the AIAS) articulated the student viewpoint:

We are not looking for any emperors to build cities without people determining what the city will be We are talking about communities determining their own outcome. What we really want you to perform is in fact the definition of "architect" which we think you have aborted.

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A generation ago, our schools helped foster the hope that motivated architects could save inner city neighborhoods from urban renewal, racial hostility, and economic inequalities. Today, architecture students, like their university colleagues, are not confrontational activists; instead of marching in protest, we are likely to join a charrette to design shelters for the homeless, write articles in journals, or attend a symposium sponsored by public in-

terest groups. In some ways, we are less bold today; on the other hand, we may realize more changes by working through the system instead of fighting it.

One route for serving the public interest that operates effectively in today's businesslike atmosphere is actually a survivor from the 1960s: the community design center, or CDC. These nonprofit collaboratives of architects and planners continue to serve those who cannot afford architectural services, but their methods have changed over the past two decades. Graduates interested in service-oriented alternatives, while working in a diversified office, might investigate CDCs.

In the 1960s and '70s architects and students established nonprofit design clinics in many of America's poor urban neighborhoods. Their atmosphere was casual, and work assignments were *ad hoc*. Here architects and interns believed that they could show how to improve deteriorating housing and instill good design in grassroots construction projects. They recognized that established neighborhoods were an asset, no matter how old the housing stock, and led protests to halt the construction of elevated highways, overscaled apartment towers, and other urban renewal blunders.

In the 1970s, CETA and other federal programs enabled CDCs to provide wages for staff workers, so that they need not depend entirely on volunteers. With a paid workforce, each



could provide professional services at little or no cost. They invited clients to join the design process, and publicized their novel work methods, so that private architectural firms could learn about interactive design methods.

Students were a major force in these design centers; often they convinced their universities to sponsor and fund storefront architectural clinics. In 1973, students at Berkeley created the Asian Architectural Association to assist the ethnic neighborhoods of San Francisco where they had grown up. Twenty-five years ago, the Pratt Center was started by Ron Shiffman, who had just graduated from Pratt Institute's department of city and regional planning. At first, it was primarily an advocacy and community information center for creating alternatives to governmental urban renewal policies. Over the years, it has expanded its architectural design services, and now accepts fees which help support a collaborative team of architects and planners.

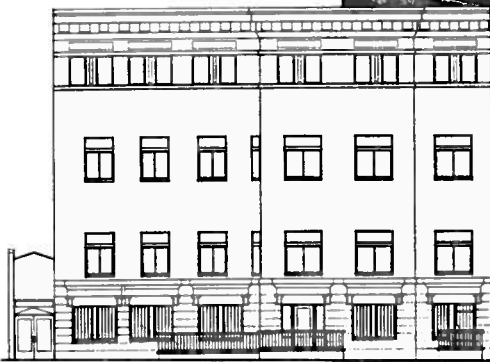
An Experiment Takes Hold

While the ideals that generated community design centers are as strong as ever, the means to reach them have become more refined. Federal programs that supported staff members and design contracts disappeared during the Reagan administration; in order to survive, community design centers became financially autonomous—they balanced income-generating work with projects billed on a sliding scale.

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John Silber, architect for the Los Angeles Community Design Center, said that they survived the drought of federal funding because their previous efforts to save ethnic communities had given them plenty of financial know-how. They pared down their staff and restructured themselves into a two-fold service. Maximizing their experience as planners, they became developers for affordable housing projects, and sustained a high volume of work and a steady income for the CDC. In the meantime, the center continued to offer architectural design services and act as a policy advocate, often on behalf of those with no way to pay—the homeless of skid row, for example.

At the Pratt Collaborative, the generalist approach they had developed in the early years proved advantageous. Cindy Harden. Architec-



Two rehabilitation projects by the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development: preceding page, Pacific House, a residence for adults with histories of mental disabilities and substance abuse. This page: existing facade photographed with renovation superimposed; Project Outward Bound, a barrier-free house for the disabled, designed in collaboration with Peter Wall.

Opposite page, corridor seating, Swiss-American Hotel, a residence rehabilitated by Asian Neighborhood Design.



Courtesy Pratt Center for Community and Environmental Design.

Resolving social issues and working with limited means does not preclude good design; it promotes intelligent choices.

tural Director at the center, said that the shift to self sufficiency has been difficult, but adds that today, the range of their services is comparable to that of most medium-sized firms. Their work is professional, and their employment advertisements appear next to those of New York's private firms. However, their clientele is distinct—they serve nonprofit organizations and design housing for the poor.

The scope of work undertaken by CDCs has grown over the past decade; they expanded their services to remain solvent and to respond to broadened client needs. Because they are flexible, CDCs readily work with those who are not easily served by conventional architectural offices. The East Tennessee Community Design Center of Knoxville serves a 16-county area, with 1/3 of their projects geared towards rural clients. Annette Anderson, the Director, notes that this CDC, unlike those in most cities, relies on volunteers. Fifty architects contribute two to four hours per week as professional advisors; their low income clients often help build projects designed by the center's consultants and interns.

Today, Asian Neighborhood Design (AND), the descendant of the Asian Architectural Association, has \$1 million budget for the entire agency (including \$325,000 for the architectural component), five full time architects, and public recognition for their renovation of high density, low cost housing. Seven years ago, AND saw that thousands of single old residents of Chinatown lived in one room apartments. To make the best of their cramped living spaces, staff architects designed economical furniture and storage systems. With the knowledge gained from this project they launched two new programs: a Housing Advisory Service and a workshop for building furniture. AND speaks on behalf of those who would be abused or easily displaced by San Francisco's inflationary real estate market; they also train young people in cabinetry, and employ them in their workshop. The youths get vocational training, a job, and exposure to a professional service group; moreover, their work generates income for the center.

There are ironic twists to the longevity of CDCs; as they have become more professional, there are fewer opportunities for student volunteers. Their job assignments are organized more tightly, and there is little leeway to allow for part time assistance. There are no government funds to pay for job training, and the centers cannot provide a stipend that would sustain student trainees. Nevertheless, students can help on specific commissions, and often conduct research studies. At Knoxville, they can carry out university-

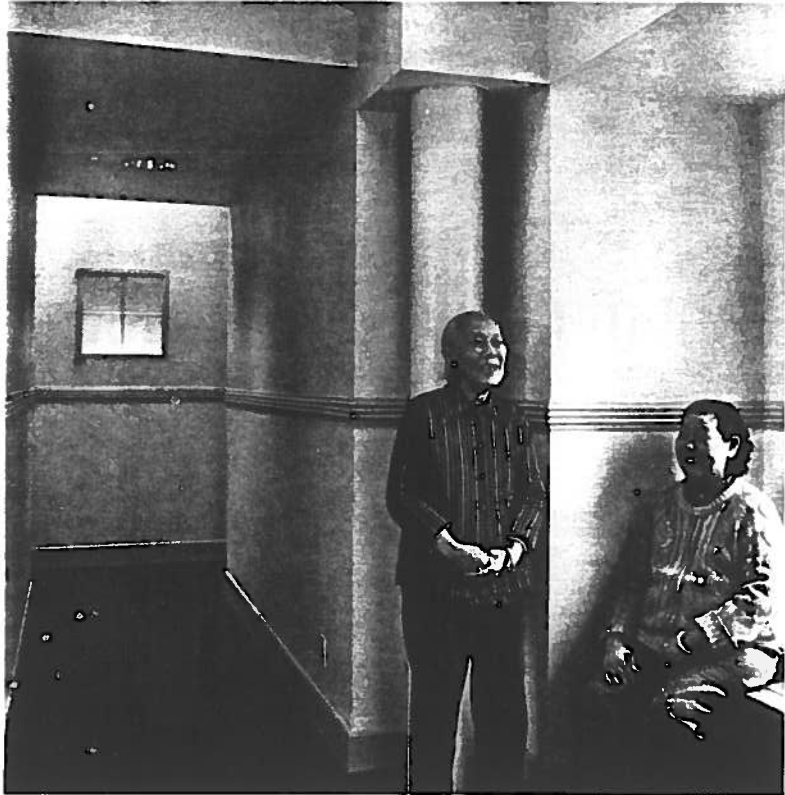
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sponsored projects under the aegis of the CDC. John Tomassi, Director of the Chicago Architectural Assistance Center, said that it is hard to use part timers effectively. At the same time, he was encouraged to find students and professionals involved in the Search for Shelter charrette, the city's response to the homeless crisis. He believes that employment at a CDC could be quite rewarding for recent graduates; their experiences will be diverse, and they will see their responsibilities expand quickly. The Pratt Collaborative seeks students with superlative design skills; Cindy Harden noted that the best applicants are new graduates with talent and dedication to the public interest.

The Premiums of Good Design

One should not expect all of the work in a CDC to be design oriented. Tomassi stated that 50 percent of the work at the Chicago CDC is basic production; there is plenty of specification writing, because many commissions are for building rehabilitation. The balance of projects are much more engaging—design proposals for individuals and non-profit institutions. One may work on a health clinic, convert a school into apartments, or plan a day care center. Usually, the projects are sited in a dense urban neighborhood; the context and design issues would be challenging to anyone; they are more diverse than the standard commissions for a private developer.

How do architects at CDCs compare their work to the expectations they had as students? They acknowledge that tight budgets limit their options, but have learned to understand good design at its most fundamental level. Tom Jones has juried student work in the Bay Area and taught at Berkeley; when he works with students, he shows them that the criteria for quality in academic projects are equally applicable to AND commissions. Resolving social issues and working with limited means does



Courtesy Lindsey Jang.

not preclude good design; it promotes intelligent choices.

As students, we have learned that the source of a successful design is a well-developed ideal. In the rehabilitation projects of a CDC, the fundamental needs of the clients teaches an architect to express an ideal concept in an economical, clear way. For example, most individuals served by a CDC have little access to the public and private spaces we take for granted. When designing an elderly residence, Jones and his colleagues created public corridors with seating areas for private conversation; they transferred the spatial layering of a typical main street to the hallway of a house. At AND, like any CDC, good design is a means to help people confirm their positive energies; to those with financial, psychological, or health problems, a sensitively designed interior can be particularly uplifting.

John Silber believes more students should study the problems generated by substandard housing; from the poor, we can learn how important it is to develop a sense of control over one's environment. He explained that working with the disadvantaged has helped him overcome a middle class parochialism; through his work with people whose needs are more acute than his, he has revised his definition of architectural quality. Now the simple ways that space can lend dignity to users seems more important than ever. □