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Design VI

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Meaningful Impacts on Humans: Architecture Gets a (Much Needed) Facelift

With the intention of having a 'revolutionary' impact on people, I switched majors from Communication to Architecture in my sophomore year. According to a 1994 survey conducted by the Carnegie Foundation, "39 percent [of the sampled architecture students had] a desire to improve the quality of life in communities or improve the built environment".[1] 'Purpose,' the concept of having a sense of meaning in one's life, comes to mind when examining the responses to the survey. Over the last three years, the idea of using architecture to affect people on a deeper level has become a lofty dream; and my purpose has declined as a result.[i] Yet, Design VI is rekindling my faith in architecture. The course content from the last month has provided inspirational morsels that align nicely with my sensibilities; that can be implemented in my future career, and that made me ask "*how can public interest design (PID) rejuvenate the field of architecture?*".

The course readings and videos have urged architects to practice architecture in new ways, i.e., to be revamped so that architecture can be designed by everyone. Alastair Parvin affirmed this notion when he suggested that the greatest advancements in architecture occurred when architects designed buildings for everyone.[2] However, now architecture is faced with the notion that not only has the field been used to service the one percent of the world's wealthiest, but also that it always has been.[3] To reverse these toxic connotations, the field of architecture needs to become accessible and equitable. One resonating solution is to develop architectural design into a science that is used to meet user needs.[ii]

The non-profit design group, IDEO.org, posits that, when service is at "the heart of the process," a human-centered design will be triumphant.[4] Through live prototyping and pilot tests, IDEO.org allows designers to demo models of their products, providing a chance to learn from failure and refine before producing the final product.[5] For this approach to work, architects need to trust the feedback of the people that they are serving. To uphold standards for community

[1] Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang., *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*. (Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996.), 7.; Boyer and Mitgang, 9.

[2] Alastair Parvin., "Architecture by the People for the People." Lecture, February 2013. Video file. TED. Posted February 2013. Accessed February 19, 2019. https://www.ted.com/talks/alastair_parvin_architecture_for_the_people_by_the_people#t-322997.

[3] Alastair Parvin., "Architecture by the People for the People".

[4] IDEO.org. "The IDEO Field Guide to Human-Centered Design." IDEO.org. Last modified 2015. Accessed February 20, 2019. http://www.designkit.org/resources/1., 133.

[5] IDEO.org. "The IDEO Field Guide to Human-Centered Design., 135.; IDEO.org. "The IDEO Field Guide to Human-Centered Design., 146.; IDEO.org. "Mindsets." Ideo.org. Accessed February 19, 2019. http://www.designkit.org/mindsets.

feedback and optimal occupant comfort levels, a stringent evaluation and reflection system is necessary, too.[6] These scientific architectural design methods are rooted in causation, rather than correlation. Designers test to see what users want – before constructing the final product. Die Baupiloten's "spatial atmospheres" design approach – similar to the modernist adage "form follows function" – mandates that the design of a buildings' acoustics, scents, and textures amount to the form of a building (**Photos I and II**, page 4). Through interactive workshops akin to experiments, the firm is able to identify the poetic qualities of spaces that align with the narratives and primal needs of users.[7] The method of monitoring user feedback, learning from it, and responding to it (before constructing the final building) seems logical and applicable to my future work.[iii] There are several other methods that are worth using in the future.

IDEO.org's collaging and mental-mapping workshops, as well as individual, group and expert interviews, are other useful tools for my future work.[8] [iv] Interviews should stimulate a genuine two-way dialogue with users, therefore improving inclusivity.[9] In addition, I would arm populaces with self-build projects, rousing creative and technical confidence in communities – and eventually independent architecture projects. Diébédo Francis Kéré's Primary School project in Gando, Burkina Faso puts this idea into practice (**Photo III**, page 4).[v] The communication barrier between Kéré and the Gando locals posed a problem, but Kéré was able to use codified symbols and prototypes to explain his ideas. Despite the communication barrier, Gando has fewer zoning laws and restrictions than in the Western world, which gave Kéré design freedom.[10, vi] Nevertheless, there might be more opportunities (for myself and other architects) to implement functionalist design methodologies in other countries.[11] Unlike self-build projects, PID does not seem to be affected by the ordinances, so it appears to be gaining traction in the U.S.[12, vii]

Since its creation in 1968, PID and its affiliated scoring system, SEED, have been encouraging human agency, a collective effort toward achieving common goals and effectiveness.[13, viii] In order to be SEED certified, buildings need to satisfy the triple bottom line

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[6] Lisa Abendroth and Bryan Bell. "Social Economic Environmental Design Methodology." In *Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook*, edited by Lisa Abendroth and Bryan Bell, 93-108. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016., 96.; Abendroth, Lisa, and Bryan Bell., 99-101.

[7] Susanne Hofmann., *Participation and Architecture: Die Baupiloten Methods and Projects*. Berlin, Germany: JOVIS Verlag GmbH, 2015. PDF., 23-25.

[8] IDEO.org. "Mindsets." Ideo.org. Accessed February 19, 2019. http://www.designkit.org/mindsets.

[9] Abendroth, Lisa, and Bryan Bell., 93-94.

[10] American Institute of Architects, and Hayes, R.L., 128.; D.F., Kéré, (2003, October). Architect's Record: 2004 Award Cycle (Report No. 2920.BOU). Retrieved from https://www.akdn.org/sites/akdn/files/media/documents/AKAA%20press%20kits/ 2004%20AKAA/Primary%20School%20-%20Burkina%20Faso.pdf

[11] Hofmann, 14.

[12] American Institute of Architects, and Hayes, R.L., 156.; American Institute of Architects, and Hayes, R.L., 163.

[13] American Institute of Architects, and R.L Hayes. *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*. Fifteenth ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2014. PDF., 156.

factors: social, environmental, and economic.[14] The 'social' aspect of SEED makes it one of the only programs concerned with creating benchmarks for human comfort. In addition, PID is reliant on civic engagement. In PID, civic architects and architecture students would step out of their 'god-like' roles and take on new responsibilities at community design centers and "political office[s]".[15] By collaborating with users and other project stakeholders, architects become in sync with the needs of the community, making change possible at the political level.[16, ix]

Convincing architects that PID is beneficial is not going to be easy (because a majority of the work is pro bono). The antiquated Beaux Arts education system needs an overhaul. Architecture students and their professors need to form alliances with the communities that surround the universities.[17] The collaboration might result in what Rachel Remen calls "a sense of satisfaction".[18] Achieved by "serving" people and being empathic toward their situation.[19] While the emotional reward might be enough to persuade some architects to adopt PID methods, the low salaries might deter some architects. As the PID begins to prove itself (using data from measurement tests like SEED), it should receive more backing. Funding from wealthy donors, partnerships, and governments could make PID viable for architects trying to maintain a comfortable lifestyle.[20] If PID becomes prevalent, the field of architecture will be one step closer to a comprehensive facelift.

Architects may have formal training in architecture, but that does not make them superior to other stakeholders. For architecture to stay relevant, architecture learning opportunities should not be exclusive. In addition, the role of architects has to change. Architects can no longer dominate the design process. Instead, they have to serve everyone. Interpreting the public's desires and dreams and making them a reality.[21] Everyone should have the opportunity to create the spaces that they deserve. Spaces that inspire everyone to reach their own fulfillment. In doing this work, many architects will finally get to make the impacts that they have been craving. Maybe even the 1,755 architecture students from the 1994 Carnegie Foundation survey will get their chance.[22]

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[14] American Institute of Architects, and Hayes, R.L., 128.; Barbara Brown Wilson. "What Social Justice Movements Can Teach Us about Public Interest Design." In *Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook*, edited by Lisa Abendroth and Bryan Bell, 19-33. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016., 30.
[15] American Institute of Architects, and Hayes, R.L., 162.
[16] American Institute of Architects, and Hayes, R.L., 162.
[17] Brause, Caryn. *The Designer's Field Guide to Collaboration*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. PDF., 14.
[18] Remen, Rachel Naomi. "Helping, Fixing, or Serving?" Lion's Roar. Last modified August 6, 2017. Accessed February 19, 2019. https://www.lionsroar.com/helping-fixing-or-serving/.
[19] Remen, Rachel Naomi. "Helping, Fixing, or Serving?".
[20] Wilson, Barbara Brown., 30-31
[21] Hofmann, 12.
[22] Boyer and Mitgang, 7.

Appendix

Photos I and II. Erika-Mann Elementary School Update by Die Baupiloten[23]
Die Baupiloten used a series of interactive tests to discover the sensibilities of elementary school children—allowing them to design spaces that gelled with the needs of the students.[24]
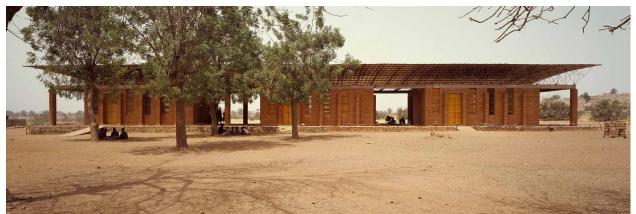

Photo III. Outside view of Diébédo Francis Kéré's Primary School project in Burkina Faso[25]

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[23] Bitter, Jan. *Refurbishment of Erika-Mann Elementary School I*., Bitter, Jan. *Refurbishment of Erika-Mann Elementary School II*.,
[24] Hofmann, 25-26.
[25] Duchoud, Siméon. Diébédo Francis Kéré's Primary School. Photograph.

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Endnotes

[i] Architecture students enrolled in the UMass Amherst Architecture department are rarely (if ever) tasked with interfacing with the public or clients. This might cause students to lose their motivation for doing architecture. One could make the argument that architecture is innately human-centric (as it deals with the usability, shelter, and the scale of spaces), but with some retooling, it could truly define how humans are shaped starting in their formative years and until their death.

[ii] It is often difficult to know if a completed building will meet the needs of its inhabitants.

Another overarching concept and non-negotiable, is that architecture needs to respect, involve, arm, and serve the public—allowing everyone to understand and carry-out the design process.

[iii] This should guarantee occupant satisfaction. It should be environmentally sustainable too. If a building keeps serving its community (and does not need to get torn down) then it ultimately saves on lots of resources and makes for environmentally sustainable architecture.

[iv] The workshops are useful because they are interactive and allow the users to express their creative sensibilities and how they perceive the world (as their creations might illuminate subtle hierarchies that might have gone unnoticed, otherwise).

[v] Diébédo Francis Kéré put the self-build design to use by collaborating with the Burkina Faso locals and teaching them architecture principles and assembly techniques that they could apply in their own separate projects.

[vi] Self-build architecture projects are less prevalent in the United States, and to a lesser extent, in Europe), which might be a consequence of zoning by-laws, redlining, and politics. Having fewer rules could drastically speed up the time it takes to complete self-build projects.

[vii] However, PIDs widespread acceptance by the architecture practice has yet to happen, because it is not exactly sustainable from a financial point of view.

[viii] SEED stands for Social Economic Environmental Design

[ix] A mutual respect and trust between all parties facilitates the sharing ideas and feedback, because people should have a reduced fear of scorn or ridicule.