

Tuning Established Models - Community Design Centers

Rex L. Curry

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Over the last twenty years, Rex Curry has taught a variety of urban planning seminars and studios in Pratt's School of Architecture, the Graduate Program for Planning and the Environment, and in the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development. As the former president of the national Association for Community Design, Inc. (ACD), he has furthered the development of this national organization by representing a combination of for profit and nonprofit planning and architectural practices in the United States.

One mainstay of community service through architecture is the community design center, some of which have existed for over twenty-five years and contributed a unique body of knowledge and great depth of experience. CDCs have come to represent great potential for a new form of professional practice.

Community Development and Design

Just over 30 years ago at the 100th convention of the AIA in Portland, Oregon, Whitney M. Young Jr. demanded more accountability from the planning and architectural profession. He indicated that inner cities were in great distress and the architectural profession was not rising to the challenge of addressing physical and social problems. His concern remains today, but it has been met in part by an idea that emerged at this meeting -- the community design center (CDC). Through CDCs, architects and planners have found creative ways to serve community organizations and distressed urban and rural regions throughout the country. CDCs have contributed two new social empowerment goals: these are valuing neighborhood and community leadership as essential to lasting, useful social change and creating alternative markets for investment. Young strongly suggested that universities could lead the way by nurturing a new and diverse base of talent that could alter the profession's dependency on market forces by focusing on helping communities meet their needs.

I will describe some of the lessons I have learned at Pratt Institute's Center for Community and Environmental Development (PICCED) and from many colleagues who supported the continuing development of the national Association for Community Design (ACD). In this way I will share my perspective about the successes and challenges to the institutionalization of CDCs.

Continuous Learning Relationships

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes an authentic educational experience as one in which people make a dedicated effort to understand the reality they seek to transform. He calls this the praxis -- in which those who help and those who are being helped, help each other simultaneously. In this way, the act of helping becomes free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped. Authentic help is an experience of balance that occurs when helping becomes free of the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped. He says,

"Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world... "

Based on this education-as-freedom idea, the university and the community share the responsibility of enriching the student/faculty experience and participating in the community's development. The traditional student/faculty experience is embedded in the fifteen-week semester. It has a central subject, a set of tasks, and routine evaluation periods. If the university wants only to enrich the faculty-student experience, this is all that is required. But if it sees a role in community development, it needs to effectively engage the community, develop methods for assisting communities in choosing what to know and place greater control over the content, quality and character of those services in the hands of those served. In adapting these elements CDCs become an influential force for community development.

Goals of the CDC

The Association for Community Design serves a variety of CDCs including university-based, independent non-profit and volunteer organizations that draw from professionals willing to support community development initiatives.¹ Design Centers serve as advocates for social justice in an adversarial system of adjudication. They help to make viable arguments for resources to right past wrongs and build local capacity.

An individual architectural project has a developer, a contractor, and an end-user to whom the designer is accountable. In the community design model, the whole community is considered to be the developer, contractor and end-user. This engenders an entirely different design process offering multi-layered opportunities. With this vision, CDCs can respond to a universal assess

project for an elderly household, or community garden while simultaneously developing a multi-family, substantial rehabilitation project and the construction of a new childcare center.

The range of project opportunities and the selection of methods to further inform these choices also define the content of the learning relationship between the community and the designer. The selection of technical assistance methods improves local capacity for ownership and control, management and operation of neighborhood environments.

Meeting the community on level ground means just that. How many beautifully designed playgrounds by design-build studios fell to ruin a few years later? How many new public housing projects and community facilities were built but failed to garner the resources or even recognize the need for a much larger capacity-building process? Even high quality, award-winning designs have been failures. In my view, the missing component has been the quality of end-user control. Home ownership is on top of the list these days, as are mutual housing and co-housing. Other forms of end user control such as strong tenant organizations and community-based management and development corporations are equally relevant.

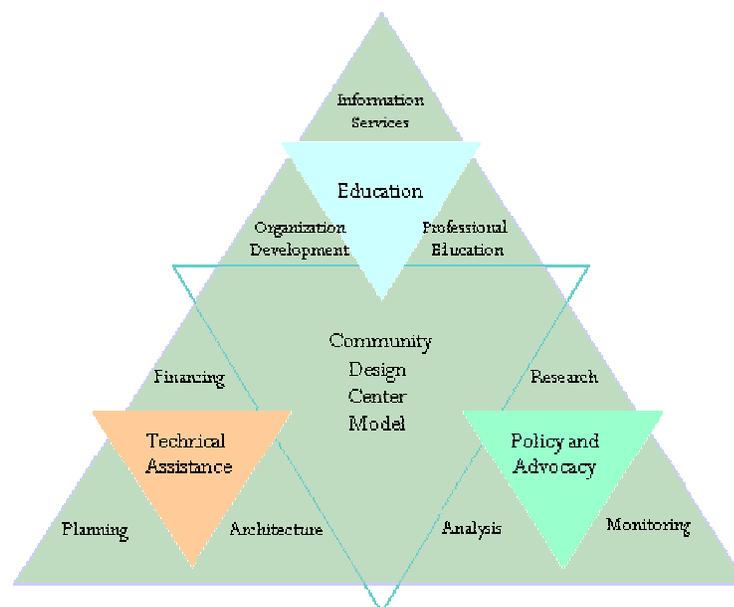
The CDC is a nonprofit model of service that promotes such development ideas, however, it is more likely that the CDC advocates something previously thought unlikely, if not impossible. When successful, they create opportunity; the for-profit firm in the community celebrates the CDC's arrival and provides it with assistance. An old saying goes, "if you attack the establishment long and hard enough, it will eventually make you a member".

Problem-Based Learning

It is not always the first choice to jump right into the fray and attack the complex conditions that negatively alter the quality of life in a community. It is also possible for the university to offer safe haven for all concerned. There is a difference between problem-based learning and service-based learning when universities attempt to serve a distressed community

"What problem are we trying to solve?" is quite different from "What service are we capable of providing?" The first question attempts to define the issues, the second is a take it or leave it proposition. To implement programs that are sensitive to this issue a CDC needs to note three things: a community in socioeconomic distress is not a place for class experiments; continuity with the community from semester to semester, year to year is mandatory; and defining and redefining the problems addressed is a continuous process for all participants.

The work is a full time job with full time responsibilities. Community engagement processes are not limited to one-time workshops but are multiple procedures applied to shifting contexts throughout the timeframe of a community development process. Faculty and students should work and think in terms of an ordinary calendar year. They also need a staffing structure that supports this framework. What an organization can make recur is a demonstration of control, stability, and accountability to these cycles of activity.



CDC Models

The source of a CDC's success and year-to-year survival is in how it addresses social divisions in this problem-finding/problem-solving situation. The center of the planning and design processes is a focused on a distressed community's endogenous capacity for leadership and the capacity of planning and architecture to serve this leadership in the formation of new markets.

In the following review of CDCs, the combination of three resources is present. These are, first, technical assistance services such as architecture, planning, and financial packaging; and second, education and training services that address and define new learning situations. These situations are caused by bringing together participants who live and work in the distressed community and the people ostensibly representing "a helping relationship" with the introduction of resources. The third element is "proof of viability" derived from taking stands on issues. Education and Technical Assistance are vital, but tend to weaken in effectiveness without the action implied by combining the terms Policy and Advocacy.

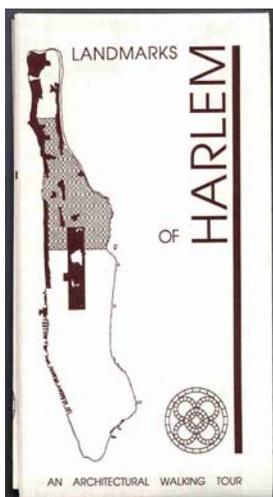
The Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development (PICCED) began as a vision of service to the distressed communities of New York City by architects and planners in Pratt's graduate planning department. Founded in 1963, it is the oldest university-based advocacy planning organization in the country. The graphic above describes the philosophical and to some degree, the management structure of PICCED.

Among the first community projects were community leadership workshops in the 1960s and early 1970s. PICCED planners translated federal urban renewal legislation into terms people could understand and illustrated to them probable impacts on their home turf. PICCED's technical assistance and advocacy attempted to generate community-based alternatives to proposals developed by nonresidents. This helped to establish development concepts that reflected local values, interests, needs, and concerns.



Senator Robert F. Kennedy toured the Bedford-Stuyvesant community in 1966. In the preceding three years, a comprehensive neighborhood plan conducted by PICCED and the Central Brooklyn Coordinating Council was on going. Senator Kennedy's visit helped to form the consensus and capital for the nation's first community-based development corporation -- the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation. The community's vision was to create a locally controlled community development corporation with the capacity for comprehensive and integrative development. Such partnerships with community groups in leadership development supported the provision of architectural services through faculty participation, joint ventures and the formation of the Pratt Planning and Architectural Collaborative in mid -1970s at the height of New York City's housing crisis.

PICCED's focus was developed by learning through leadership training experiences. This led to creating affordable housing resources through preservation and development. Without this grounding in the reality of capacity building and in the development of local nonprofit ownership and control mechanisms for capturing existing as opposed to promised assets, PICCED's internal capacity for policy analysis and advocacy would have been weak.



With the assistance of PICCED, New York's City College Architectural Center (CCAC) was formed in 1977. It provides comprehensive planning assistance and supports joint ventures. In part, this is a lesson of the Architect's Renewal Committee of Harlem (ARCH). The lack of separation between the community empowerment and "go to scale" agenda is at the heart of local controversies. It led to the loss of ARCH as a resource in Harlem. The CCAC is a teaching office of the School of Architecture where the partnership for learning that can occur between community organizations and students shapes and defines the services. One of CCAC's most popular products was "Landmarks of Harlem". It was the first detailed foldout map highlighting Harlem's social and architectural history with photos and self-guided tour suggestions. One of the best forms of activism is recognizing the need for a resource and serving that need. This simple idea is now part of a Harlem-wide legacy project.

Other CDCs, in particular the Los Angeles Community Design Center (LACDC) formed in 1968, in San Francisco, Asian Neighborhood Design (AND) formed in 1973 and in Seattle, Environmental Works (EW) formed in 1971 have sustained a public service mission as nonprofit, regional development corporations. Their demonstration projects set new standards for participation and design and their efforts capitalized on developing new businesses on behalf of their low- and moderate-income constituency. Asian Neighborhood Design turned a local job-training program into a national high-end office furniture company. Its unique combination of leadership training in the formation of nonprofit private sector company and its tenacity in getting market share in housing development and industrial design is well known.

In contrast, a single-minded entrepreneurial approach can become a problem. In one case, a CDC design team *beat out* a member of its board of directors for a major architectural project. This sparked a review of this CDC's mission that threatened its capacity to stay fully involved with the day-to-day problems of community development. The CDC won its demand for an empirical base in development, but agreed to limit its practice to the most highly distressed areas. Another CDC spent many years building an organization in a large public housing complex only to be challenged in court by the state's board of architects.² This CDC was forced to leave its university-base in order to sustain its role in addressing tenant control issues.

Staying small works, the director of the Community Design Center in Minneapolis formed in 1969, preferred to take on projects that illustrated the capacity of the community base to innovate on its own behalf. Its "food and fiber" project is an example of focusing on community assets. In this case, small scale home-based food packaging and garment manufacturing. Bringing planning and design to this community contributed to small business development by women.

Sizing pro bono activities in relation to the market area also works. The Troy Architecture Program (TAP), formed in 1969 in Troy, New York has sustained its nonprofit status by simply staying within the IRS rules and in so doing within the limits of the market for services in its region. The work of this office including helping a low-income household get indoor plumbing and restore a church basement's former glory as an after school center proves that a private practice career in low-income communities is possible.

An emphasis on training and education has served the remaining CDCs that began in the 1960s and 1970s. The Louisville Community Design Center, (1968) and the Community Design Center of Atlanta (1976) have remained small and focused on integrative planning and research. The East Tennessee Community Design Center (1970) in Knoxville represents one of the few CDCs that have sustained a long term of service in the rural community. Finally, Assist, Inc. (1969) in Salt Lake City, Utah has served as an innovator for low- and moderate-income housing preservation by leveraging investments in universal design and as an advocate for a rational mass transportation system in the region.

Four CDC volunteer programs must also be considered for their longevity and effect. The most recognized volunteer program is that of the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh (CDCP) formed in 1968. In openly marketing its work as a broker of architectural and planning services, the CDCP has confronted and solved many of the problems and limitations of volunteerism. It provides a mechanism for the city's major firms to seek out CDCP's assistance, experience and in house expertise. It has also provided a vehicle through which "demonstration" projects could be managed through its popular "Renovation Information Network". CDC in Baltimore (Neighborhood Design Center, formed in 1968), Philadelphia (Community Design Collaborative, formed in 1968) and Washington D.C. (Community Design Services, formed in 1991) with varying degrees of volunteer participation, have also sustained a mechanism that supports the engagement of architecture, engineering, and planning firms in distressed areas.

Until ACD was formed in 1975, resources and advice to assist in the formation of CDCs and help them through tough times were rare at the local level and difficult to find nationally. The ACD has advocated for permanent forms of public service design practices that can integrate the functions of community organizing, planning, finance, and architecture.

The Future of CDCs

CDCs remain a somewhat silent partner in the world of design. They have not been effective chroniclers of their own times and work. As CDCs generally shift credit to their clients they often do not assume the esteem they deserve for their work. As much of the architectural media still holds the traditional view that design is a high-value servant of the wealthy and powerful, CDC design has received limited publicity and efforts to reach out from the grassroots are rare.

There are signs this is changing with the growing body of literature on community engagement³. Two relatively new periodicals, *New Village* and *Designer/builder* are important in establishing a mainstream dialog on issues of social change from a planning and architectural viewpoint.⁴

CDCs will need more than publicity to achieve balance, if not power, in the community building process. Into whose hands do we now entrust the future of a distressed community? The answer is unique to each locality. CDCs have managed to establish new fronts, but more documentation is needed to support and broaden the dialog and to firmly establish them as valued community-development resources.

Successful community design centers are those that have encouraged community organizations to solve problems by engaging in the type of helping relationship defined by Paulo Freier. An effective design center program will engage learners in problem finding and solving situations that address the complexity of unmet need and weak or non-existent economic demand for services. When working in distressed areas, design uses tools that help people understand the reality they would like to transform. Design enables the building of mutually enriching and role reversible relationships between those who help and those who are being helped. The idea is to achieve a sustainable community building process that argues for balance and human dignity.

Imagine professional schools in a university as vertical elements without much communication between them. In this setting, the CDC might connect a neighborhood organizer's work to an urban planner's research on vacant land, and a landscape architect's selection of those most suitable for gardens and playgrounds. It is helpful for the organizer to find people who would hope to create a garden and those who would seek the physicality of a playground. It is helpful for the planner to define the social demography surrounding each site in relationship to the organizer's community. Infill housing, childcare, or housing could emerge as possibilities. It is helpful for the designer to have a community interested in site evaluations, site preparation work for interim uses, or design and build experience that represent the desire for change. I believe that the lifelong act of learning how to build a community is perfected in the practice of community design.

¹ CDCs are defined at <http://www.communitydesign.org> in the *History of Community Design* in the website bibliography's Publications/Design Section. Contributors to the site are always welcome. Sadly the dynamic portions of this site have collapsed under its new leadership (2005)

² The CDC's work was built on the implementation of Section 3 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1968. It requires the local housing authority to make a best effort in building the capacity of community businesses and residents in all public investment and building rehabilitation activities. Congress established this policy to ensure economic opportunities generated by Federal assistance be directed toward low-income persons, particularly those who are recipients of government assistance for housing.

³ Mehrhoff, W. Arthur *Community Design: A Team Approach to Dynamic Community Systems*, (London: Sage, 1999) and; Sanoff, Henry. *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000) present techniques for community participation.

Wates, Nick. *The Community Planning Handbook: How People Can Shape Their Cities, Towns and Villages in Any Part of the World*. (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 2000)

Morrish, William R. and C.R. Brown. 1994. *Planning To Stay*. Univ. of Minnesota: The Design Center for American Urban Landscape. This is an excellent manual for mitigating the damage of social and economic change on a neighborhood.

Jones, Tom, W. Pettus, M. Pyatok. *Good Neighbors: Affordable Family Housing*. (New York: MacGraw Hill, 1997) This book includes a description of process for community participation in design.

⁴ *New Village: Building Sustainable Cultures* is a publication of Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility, Berkeley, California; focuses on planning, development and revitalization processes. *Designer/builder: A Journal of The Human Environment* is published by Fine Additions, Inc., Santa Fe, New Mexico and is dedicated to examining creative partnerships between organizations serving the low- and moderate-income communities and the design and building professions.