

Between Tower and Street

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For youth, in thrall of prints and maps,
The universe is equal to his vast desire.
How grand the world beneath the lamp at night,
In memory's eye, how strangely slight.

- Charles Baudelaire, "Le voyage"¹

The city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you: to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it; the address not being written, it must establish its own writing.

- Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*²

INTRODUCTION

A collage of urban fragments more than a coherent fabric, North Philadelphia's vast inner-cityscape presents a protean mix of neighborhood environments whose contradictions and discontinuities typify the present conditions of the postindustrial city. Juxtaposed are well-kept blocks of dense row housing and acres of empty, over-grown lots; complex transportation systems and abandoned industrial sites; fast food chains and the remnants of once prosperous neighborhood shopping streets — testaments to the dramatic cycle of growth and decay that has taken place in North Philadelphia since it was first developed as part of the city only one hundred and fifty years ago. The imprint of the gridiron plan of street and infrastructure remains burnished in the landscape; the grid's unstinting orderliness belying the actual patterns of inhabitation and hierarchy that exist sub rosa among those who reside here. To the uninitiated visitor, the dissonance is palpable but eerily unidentifiable. To the urban designer, the task of creating new systems of order on a base of recision and contradiction, has proven truly sisyphian.

In this context of physical and social disjuncture is placed Temple University, itself a community of over thirty

thousand, with its own critical mass and identity. The institution maintains an uneasy peace with its neighbors, having experienced growth in a kind of converse relationship to the decline of the surrounding community, which the university had been originally founded to serve. The largest landowner in North Philadelphia, it is in fact also the major employer of the area's residents; but unlike the historic relationship between manufactory and local neighborhood, the current North Philadelphia population is not economically critical to the functioning of the institution. The university's most essential labor force is drawn from highly educated non-residents. The local youth is both too poor and inadequately prepared to represent a significant market share for the university; the paying student body comes chiefly from non-inner city areas.

The university students are often disconcerted by their chaotic surroundings and wary of the predatory habits of its denizens, but they are nevertheless insulated from looking deeply into their immediate context by the inherent transience of their situation; they will not have to endure this for long. They will adapt though a "trained schizophrenia" that allows them to detach themselves from their context, secure in the cultural belief that learning is a commodity that is not anchored in a place. Conversely the resident population regards the university as yet another interruption in the fabric, a kind of permanent inaccessible void, at whose edges their lives are enacted. Forays into the sphere of the university are often envisioned as foraging expeditions; treasures plucked from this source — a ticket to a sports event, a job, a stolen car radio, a seminar with free lunch — are chimerical, having mythological value on the street, but sustaining little moral capital. The two populations remain uncannily aloof, occupying the same space without contention or sharing, with little common ground on which to initiate even the most perfunctory civic intercourse that might lead to the essential work of civilization — building community. Neither has reason to step through the looking-glass, entering the thorny territory between the "tower" and the "street."

THE EDUCATIONAL PARADOX: OBJECTIVISM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

The culture of academic architecture, urban design and planning offers scant means to explore, to know, or to create articulate forms in response to the puzzle of building community, which is its implicit task. Despite the elemental fact — so unremittingly present in North Philadelphia — of physical environments as mediators between self and other, between being and expression, the place-making disciplines have conscientiously avoided entering into the chasm between what is studied and what is lived. The content of our inquiry has tended toward the highly delimited exercise, using as the primary tool of investigation the representation of place rather than experience. While representation is a potent means of expanding/containing problem, when used exclusively, as is most often the case, it actually becomes the context for study. The place of authentic struggle is translocated, made world-less and reduced; devitalizing the act and purpose of inquiring. What is generated — though often exquisite — is rarely new, but rather the scene of a bloodless rapprochement between seducer and slave. Students have not learned but rather have acquired the skills of production.

Discomfort with conflict and with otherness, is conveniently glossed over by the central academic code of objectivism, described by Parker Palmer in his essay “Community, Conflict and Ways of Knowing”: “[Objectivism] distances the knower from the world for a very specific purpose; that is to keep its knowledge from contamination by subjective prejudice and bias.”³ Yet it is precisely the subjective prejudice and bias derived from the “contaminating” effects of bodily experiencing the concrete world that feeds the imagination and impels action and invention. This process, when intersecting with the desire and experience of others, frames the ritual of community building. Students of design denied this opportunity to engage in the place they inhabit, and to act knowingly as a member of a community, are deprived of a fundamental means of creative foment, and are learning by subtle inference to regard place as having no significance in their own — or any other — human narrative.

Since 1993 the School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Horticulture together with several disciplines from the social sciences at Temple, has grappled with these issues through a multi-year project sponsored by the US Department of Education. The project, known as the Urban Initiatives, had been conceived as a means of extending to the fragmented neighboring communities university-based expertise through products of academic research and technical service; and of exposing students to critical real-life situations. For the design disciplines, the project’s goals were interpreted to mean developing and analyzing an environmental data base, offering pro bono professional design services to the local community development corporations, and organizing urban design studios to focus on local development sites rather than those in more comfortable contexts.

Although based in a sincere commitment to improve both

the neighborhood environment and the students’ education, and with the vague, if intuitively correct, desire to enhance a “sense of community,” this rather traditional model of process and of intended outcomes proved inadequate. To develop truly creative propositions for a new and sustainable forms of communal dwelling new paradigms had to be explored; the definition of research as the “collecting” of inert data, service as the “delivery” of a commodity, and education as “study” of phenomena were terms of abstraction and joyless toil that could never inspire the creative imagination—especially given a physical context itself so ostensibly bereft of beauty and value.

Thus, new understandings of beauty and place-value had to be obtained in unconventional ways. Eventually, through the energy generated by inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural collaborations, the project forged fertile, if at times unpredictable partnerships within the academy, and between academy and community. This relational process has revealed unacknowledged inter-dependencies and has engaged the creative tension that exists between different views of place and place-making as seen from the “tower” and “street.” A powerful education has been experienced by both students and community — a model of exchange that permitted discoveries of patterns and potential visions of the environmental form that might have gone unperceived. Through this interchange, participants were compelled to diversify the means through which knowledge, synthesis, and intervention in the physical environment could be approached. The work has been undertaken — much of it concurrently — in several modalities: as curriculum-based pedagogy structured around design studio and seminar, as field-based design-research organized as atelier and community workshop, and as concrete design-build initiatives. This multi-valent mode of working has by its nature evoked the range of physical and temporal scales from the speculative/visionary to the immediate, permitting a recognition of the intrinsic simultaneity of global and local causes of a breakdown in communal form.

FORGING A COLLABORATIVE MODEL

This new model of creative process did not emerge easily: we experienced considerable struggle and initial failure in defining our expectations and the participants. The institutions which were expected to provide the most critical support in the successful integration of academic and community interests — the non-profit community development corporations, the university, and the design education establishment — were in fact most obstructionist, each having its opportunism or territorial self interest only thinly sheathed in a cloak of public-spiritedness. Guarding its own narrow agenda from being controlled by the others, each withdrew in its own way.

The first defection was by the community development corporations. As the much-proclaimed intermediaries between the resident population and the funding establishment, they were assumed to understand the needs and aspirations

of the community, and would be able to guide the community design process. Instead they eschewed this integrative role; and viewing themselves as entrepreneurs, competed to develop building projects narrowly defined to conform to available funding criteria rather than to a community-building agenda. The participating design faculty were regarded as technical expeditors offering a free commodity, and were besieged with competing requests to document projects that had been shaped a priori. At our suggestion that we reexamine the design problems with neighborhood participation, the community development corporations unceremoniously withdrew, lest conflict arise and their production efficiency diminished.

Similarly undeflected from its own goals, the university continued in its historical role as colonialist/real estate developer. At the Urban Initiatives Project's onset, the university announced its plans for the construction of a huge sports arena which would expand the campus into community's domain, dislocating residents and appropriating the threshold to neighborhood's iconic street of jazz heritage. This cast justifiable doubt on our purportedly "disinterested" academic inquiry, and ignited outrage and grandstanding among local politicians, in a drama that dominated the university administration's official community outreach agenda. The taint of a quid-pro-quo arrangement colored our most altruistic motives.

And finally, the institutionalized culture of design education, through its mainstream intellectual dialogue, was passively subversive. The concept of community involvement was a messy proposition — difficult to control, to fit cleanly into the fourteen week semester and to guarantee portfolio-ready product. The project was denigrated in a variety of ways: as "dumbing-down" the rigor of the student's inalienable right to artistic self-expression; as an exploitation of student time and labor to non-educative ends; and as the unethical foisting of non-professional work or unrealistic expectations on a powerless constituency.

The abandonment by these institutional support networks exposed the authentic contradiction in work that seeks to address the problems of community in the context of competition, colonialization, and passive aggression. This upset proved to be fortuitous. Instead of struggling to mediate between established power-bases we focused on participation at the grassroots. The "grassroots" consisted of two major constituencies: the grassroots of the community — its individual residents and members of ad hoc citizens coalitions grounded in neighborly affiliation; and the grassroots of the university — our students, many of whom whose design interests were more complex and unchallenged by the traditional content and ethic of architecture and landscape architecture education.

SITE INVENTORY AND MAPPING: VIEWS FROM STREET AND TOWER

At the project's inception, a major site inventory project

loomed, requiring a labor-intensive field research initiative for the total study area. The neighborhood fabric was so rapidly changing that the surveys done seven years earlier by the city planning commission were hopelessly out of date. In the first summer, we organized an "atelier" set up in one of the school's empty studios. We employed several students and neighborhood residents and began to conduct broad neighborhood research and site inventory. Intended only as a fact-finding exercise — a necessary but tedious task — teams of students and residents set out to comb the two hundred block study area, gathering detailed building and open space information.

We had assumed that the residents would be needed chiefly to escort the student "outsiders" through the neighborhood, to help deflect any difficult situations. But the unanticipated outcome was a rich experience in which physical fact was illustrated by the vivid subtext of neighborhood life. While working on the task at hand, resident team members were invaluable not only in facilitating on-street interaction, but they also provided insight into how space was informally used, and were able to interpret the meaning of places that might elude the objective observer. Their expertise in decoding the environment brought a dimension of transparency to the otherwise flat inventory process, and protected against the academics' unconscious desire to make sense prematurely of what appeared on the surface.

What they discovered in the decaying fabric provided a lesson in the power of the creative imagination. In the context of extreme want, necessity has nurtured invention, taking a variety of forms: community gardens and private claim of vacant lots; monumental murals on the ubiquitous blank party wall; houses reinvented as micro-businesses and places of community service; dwelling space reconfigured, extended, and richly personalized with recycled elements of building demolition; new paths woven into a landscape in decomposition. Eloquent in their stark contrast with the urban context, the most compelling interventions in the neighborhood environment have been largely undertaken outside the formally established process of design and construction.

Observations of all the site inventory team members — student, faculty, and community staff alike - were recorded on a shared "diary" map that was kept in the studio. The scaled base map permitted sizing and locating place and event. This composite of subjective, unedited observations became a critical commentary, and began to yield patterns based on intensity interest and conflict; and became a locus of creative dialogue. An example of the conflicts of perception by different constituencies emerged through notations of neighborhood landmarks. "Invisible" landmarks such Checkers Bar and Ida's Restaurant where movers and shakers of neighborhood politics have met since the Civil Rights era, were left unremarked by the students and faculty, but given emphasis on the map by the community staff. Conversely, churches, were visually dominant, and were conscientiously highlighted by the students, but surrounded by

moats of parking and no longer the institutional heart of the community, the churches were deemed non-entities by the residents, who noted them on the diary map as voids in the fabric.

Together with the subjective input, the mapping of information enabled the team to take advantage of the powers of both technology and human insight to produce a multifaceted image of the neighborhood as it exists, and to identify critical design issues. The experientially-based critique was reinforced by a set of analytic maps. The specific physical environment information was entered into the computer, and from this, a new data base was generated with sets of information regarding built and natural form, historical development, vacancy, use and condition of the environment. A rich and flexible layering of mapped information sets has permitted abstract visualization and analysis of environmental patterns.

One particularly significant analytic mapping study shows changes in building occupancy and density over time. Between 1951 and 1994 neighborhoods in the Urban Initiatives study area lost over half their housing to either vacancy or demolition. Although the net visual effect of comparison of then and now is one of frightening physical fragmentation, as a residential pattern, the existing condition shows a remarkable consistency of fabric, with the building to open space ratio approaching the more livable twelve units per acre "suburban" density. Importantly, the magnitude of change in North Philadelphia suggested that revitalization must be planned within a conceptual framework that accepts this adjustment of demographic conditions and embraces a retexturing of the neighborhood fabric in a new formal paradigm. However, development practices seeking economy in numbers had begun in some sites to restore the post war housing densities. A recent development had transformed a formerly vacant two block area of a neighborhood, in what had appeared to the professional staff as an exemplary restoration of architecture and urban fabric. The residents saw this brand new development in a different light: bringing in over one hundred welfare-dependent families with children had seriously upset the neighborhood equilibrium, overcrowding the neighborhood school, and placing a drain on communal services and resources. But it was the visually compelling and authoritative nature of the analytic maps that provided "hard evidence" to support their claim that the non-critical pursuit of industrial era residential density, in order to satisfy a nostalgic vision of the city, was dangerously naive.

TRACING THE HUMAN NARRATIVE THROUGH HOME-MADE MAPS

The discipline of reading maps and visually organizing and representing spatial phenomena — so integral to the process, and mystique, of design — was gradually made understandable and useful to people who actually lived in the place. As further means of developing graphic fluency and of uncov-

ering authentic design issues, the community staff members were encouraged to make their personal experiential maps identifying their own use patterns and the places of importance in the neighborhood and city. As expressions of aggregate experience and perception, the maps, some illustrated by their photographs, were eloquent analytic documents. One resident's map shows little notation in his immediate neighborhood, except to designate spots where he regularly stops to talk to with friends. These informal social interactions take place in only marginally structured environments of stoop and street corner, and occur as part of the fluid culture of the unemployed. In contrast, the nearby Broad Street subway line is heavily rendered, and the map is punctuated with rich descriptions of activities and events associated with other locations in the city. The map's author, a retired community activist, describes his neighborhood as "a place where I sleep but don't live." Poignantly, his vivid memories of Cecil B. Moore Avenue, once the locus of jazz-oriented night life that gave it the name "Jump Street," reveal a the powerful sense of the loss of place-identity endured by the community.

Another resident's map tells quite a different story. This mother of three young children, has chosen to settle in the neighborhood near where she was raised. Her map designates the block they live on as "home base." Originally a utilitarian back street with a mix of simple row houses, small industry and carriage houses, her block of Cabot Street now houses a cluster of activities essential to her family's life, including their home and garden, the husband's business, and their children's school, which terminates the street. Her pictures show how the couple renovated abandoned buildings for home and workplace, and have created in four adjacent open lots a spacious walled garden, that rivals and suburban back yard. The map shows home base to be a five minute walk from the stores, YMCA and the Freedom Theater on Broad Street. But despite the plenitude of vacant lands, conspicuously lacking are nearby public parks and playgrounds, and a feeling of security outside the home territory. This weakness notwithstanding, this family lives a relatively convenient life of "urban villagers." Although they have the means to settle in "better" neighborhoods, it is significant that they chose to live and to invest time and labor in this particular place. Taking advantage of neighborhood location, of lower housing densities, and of the potential richness of an irregular building fabric, they have built a new urban dwelling pattern within the framework of the old.

THE SCHOOL-BASED EXPERIENCE: PRACTICE IN THEORY

Throughout the course of the Urban Initiatives Project, design studios, independent studies, and thesis projects have been have focused on range of design issues identified as important to North Philadelphia neighborhoods. These curricular undertakings have alternated with, or been woven into the work undertaken in the more "professionally"

focused setting of the atelier, maintaining a dialogue between the speculation- and knowledge-based inquiry. The design studio offered a place of gestation for ideas generated and questions raised on the street. Students were able to research theory and precedent, develop schemes, and feed back to the community their ideas in the form of drawings and models. The experimentation process not only validated the community's right to articulate its desires, but allowed them to fully participate in critical evaluation of the ideas and forms generated from these desires.

While addressing the educational goals of the school, the studio provided the neighborhood with laboratory for experimentation and debate. Typically several interested community members would volunteer as participant/consultants, and were a regular presence in the studios and classrooms. The informal atmosphere of collegiality in the studio; the rich array of visual site documentation in models, photograph, and sketches; the accessibility of works-in-progress, all serve to demystify — indeed to deconstruct — the design process for the uninitiated. The community members provided precise local knowledge of needs and use patterns, and entered with perfect ease and enthusiasm into theoretical discussion of place and dwelling. Simultaneously, the students learned why it was necessary to wean themselves from the dependency on the verbal and graphic jargon that serves to obscure the content and quality of ideas.

The design reviews offered the opportunity for broader participation of the community. The earnestness and very lack of slickness that undergraduate students bring to their work, made the process accessible to local residents, many of whom had never been inside this, or any other university. They took their roles as experts modestly and with great dignity, intrigued and enlightened by the basic premise of the design studio — that a range of very different solutions and expressions that can be brought to bear on a particular problem. This remarkable premise, unique to the education of the designer, became a paradigm of civil discourse. Its spirit framed the formal reviews, dissolving anxiety that both groups had come to expect from their own experiences: the community, its rancorous political turf battles over proposed development projects; and the students, the competitive and hostile setting of the academic design jury. For both, the studio review, framed positively as an academic exercise provided a forum for exploring possibilities, and fostered a sincere sense of shared search for solutions to real-world problems.

NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED EXPERIENCE: THEORY IN PRACTICE

The students' educational experiences working within the neighborhood varied with their own sensibilities and with the types and duration of projects in which they were involved. Our skeptical critics — particularly those from the design education establishment — proved to be correct in identifying the messiness of the enterprise: in this process learning

is derived from a fundamentally relational exercise where the made product is explicitly a means rather than an end, and where the community is the subject rather than the object of the work. The expected sequence of exercises, traditional sources of information and authority, and techniques for evaluation difficult to adapt.

These curricular undertakings defined broadly as “hands-on” or experiential learning, were meant to immerse the students in the neighborhood context, in order to identify and resolve a local problem of some community significance, enabling success only through sustained involvement with people in their own place. The curricular framework included a service-learning seminar, a school-wide charrette, design-build studios, and independent internships with community organizations. In each project that succeeded — and not all did — a transformation to the community through its physical environment was initiated, and with this a recognition of the global causes of breakdown in communal form.

The most visible of these projects were the three small parks built throughout the duration of the Urban Initiatives Project, each providing a beautiful corner of the community — tangible evidence of the applicability of concepts of sustainable community design concurrently being developed as long range prospects in other aspects of project. One of these parks was designed in studio, and another as part of a week-long interdisciplinary charrette/competition; in both, the design process, its construction implications, the spiritual and economic value public space, and the responsibility of stewardship were laid bare for both students and community. Importantly, the construction was also regarded as a training opportunity for community members who might find employment in urban park construction and maintenance.

Several students worked in a ten-block area adopted by Habitat for Humanity. Unusual among non-profit housing organizations, Habitat regards its mission as a primarily spiritual one: it is not uniquely focused on output quantity, and depends on non-public grants, volunteer labor and sweat equity to finance construction. But as an organization run chiefly by non-residents, and one that defines itself as a constructor of home-ownership dwellings for the poor, it often misses the opportunity to fulfill its greater mission as community builder. Temple students who participated regularly in house construction, became comfortable and known in the neighborhood, and were able to create bridges between the organization and its community. They helped to organize street clean-ups, conducted informal and candid interviews with neighbors of all ages, and initiated discussions about the future of the neighborhood that resulted in participatory planning workshops and a proposal for the burgeoning micro-neighborhood. They also designed new dwelling prototypes for both rehabilitation and new construction that suit the needs and changing context of the neighborhood, incorporated affordable building strategies learned on site, and developed a fund-raising strategy for financing its construction.

Students have been profoundly energized by these undertakings, and many have chosen to pursue work as thesis projects and on a volunteer basis. The “messiness” or perhaps better put—open-endedness—of the real world involvement is indeed a fact: it has opened the door of the students’ creative and moral imaginations, and given the education of architecture a more meaningful, long term context.

DESIGN-THINKING AS A COMMUNITY PROCESS

The academic team’s direct exposure to the community’s genuine concerns, and the residents’ willingness to engage in the very speculative process of the design studio, encouraged us to embark on a broad conceptual design project for the cluster of neighborhoods that lay within the proposed government-designated Empowerment Zone. This was a truly grassroots design initiative, since, as a result of disintegrated institutional fabric, the community had virtually no leadership structure. Its churches and cultural institutions were balkanized, and its local CDC had been forced to close because of illegal business practice. But the prospect of losing significant community development resources because of internal disorder, impelled an otherwise diverse and contentious group of block captains and grassroots leaders to work together to produce a conceptual plan for their community’s future. Moreover, the academic team was optimistic about the potentials in the neighborhood fabric: this was the same neighborhood environment that offered a framework to create the eminently habitable “home base” illustrated in the resident’s experiential map.

We made it our goal to develop with the community a neighborhood design that would incorporate new paradigms of communal form that could be realized in the North Philadelphia context. Despite the extent of individual and immediate need, it became ever more apparent that it was the way in which the community lived together, that was critical to its health, and to the long term sustainability of the neighborhood fabric. The neighborhood had lost public spaces that create important interstices between individual and community because their supporting social and economic infrastructure have failed; economic development that could provide and training and employment is no longer locally-based and integral to community life; the natural systems of the region have been suppressed, adapted, or altogether extinguished by the over-building and subsequent abandonment of North Philadelphia’s landscape. Places that nourish community life and identity—the tissue spaces that elude measurement through objective economic means— are most vigorously desired by the community, yet least likely to be the subject of an “official” design study or to be realized through traditional development process. We sought to represent the latent potential in the environmental fabric; to generate patterns of interconnection between physical realms of private dwelling and community life; and to propose new institutional structure which would help redefine the neighborhood identity.

The design process was structured around a series of half-day workshops, involving a nucleus of several of the most committed community participants and the design faculty from architecture and landscape architecture. Previous site and neighborhood research, precedents in community form, and studio-generated design projections were culled for ideas and information. Two documents—the “North Philadelphia Neighborhood Wish List” and “Five Design Principles for a Sustainable Community”—were concurrently developed. The negotiations between the content of the two documents, one local needs driven, and the other, a generalized place-making manifesto, provided the conceptual warp and weft of the design propositions.

DESIGN-MAKING AS A SHARED EXERCISE

New visual means for involving community members more directly in the design process were explored. We began to see how powerful the use of objectifying techniques were in design. In his discussion of the epistemology of objectivism Palmer decries the grandiose illusion of total control: “Once you have made something into an object ... you can dissect it...[and] are now free with these dissected objects to move pieces around, to reshape the world in an image more pleasing.”⁴ But it is this “power over the world,” of being able to construct an imaginary future through manipulation of surrogate forms, that is the primary vehicle of design education (and practice)—a vehicle that might be brought into life when shared with the community.

Modeling, drawing, and computing were all used. Physical models proved most accessible and most successful when conceived and constructed for use as working tools. Elegant abstract models elicited tremendous interest and admiration, but being so complete, and beautiful, would not provoke or invite interaction. For a neighborhood planning workshop, we developed three-dimensional model-map coded to include addresses, condition, use and ownership of buildings pieces and lots. Simple construction with foam core and rubber cement encouraged the rearrangement of elements and experiments in intervention. Chiefly valuable as a means of seeing potential patterns of built and open space, as an interactive group tool, it framed and situated the “what-if” speculations as, and within, spatial and social interrelationships. Reminiscent of Sanoff’s more structured techniques, the projections with the model stimulated participants to risk negotiations as a gaming exercise, hence incorporating community-building into their design-thinking. Even so, the abstraction of this model was still daunting to many, who saw their world more in images of material detail than pattern. Larger scale models, inherently more spatial, were constructed with building elevations made of scaled photographs collaged to the building blocks of the existing neighborhood fabric, making it immediately recognizable, and good means for seeing—in space—the appearance of a new element of the neighborhood.

Exploring perspectival space through electronically-gen-

erated imagery was a representational technique we found at once compelling and impossibly opaque. The computer did have the capacity to create powerfully realistic images, but in exploratory design phases, the pseudo realism needed to make these images understandable to the lay person, was at times grotesque. Visual precocity served to close the imagination rather than opening it through the “suspension of disbelief”. Also problematic, was that the computer’s potential to simulate the visual experience of space is static and self illuminating, and always situated within the hermetic box. Unlike the hand drawing or three-dimensional model which share our space and light, physically inhabiting our world, the computer imaging process does not.

The complex operations required to construct electronic models, made it difficult to induce spontaneous, direct interaction, especially among a lay population. As the technology exists today, the one-to-one relationship between maker and medium, the intrinsic opacity of the machine, and the insistence to closure in the product, tends to preempt the open-endedness of creative community process. More success was achieved when the computer-generated image was used as part of a sequence of explorations. In one instance, the design of a public outdoor room evolved over time with the computer as facilitating agent rather than, McLuhanesque, the message itself. The design was initiated through sketches made by one community staff member. Programatically dense and vivid and uninhibited in its use of color, the elements of the handmade sketches were incorporated into a developing urban design proposal, in a well known site at the threshold of the neighborhood. An architectural student’s translation of the ideas produced a well framed, but disappointingly lifeless computer image. But using the relatively easy compositing techniques — at the suggestion of one of the neighborhood participants — we were able to import, and directly reinvent fragments of the original sketch within the computer model, and to populate the space with archived photographs of various team members, setting motion a whole series of innovative design propositions. This ad hoc, contingent nature of a process that recycles and reinterprets “found objects” that is strength of the culture of the community, found a place in perhaps the most resistant medium of the academic cult of objectivism.

CONCLUSION

In their emergence from the security of the ivory tower, the students have been given access to — and truly enter — localities and situations where the realities of physical environment and people are insistently present. The classic urban design task is invested with a fresh, meaningful sense of urgency. As in the ostensibly disordered and raw experience described by Barthes, the students have been confronted with uncertainty, disorientation, delight, fear, and sensual knowledge that is revealed only through empathic response to the human narrative “taking place.”

The students have learned from the inspiring abundance

of life-based design responses to concrete environmental situations in North Philadelphia. But for all the poignant sense of immediacy, these handmade responses to needs for shelter, commodity, wholeness, beauty and self-expression, are conceived and constructed in the ethos of impermanence and contingency — the products of an urban hunter and gatherer culture. For the denizen of the “street,” the inability to maintain control of their environment is debilitating: the total reliance on circumstance as profoundly destructive to the process of building community as is the insistence on objectivist means of knowing and making are to those who dwell in the “tower.” When the tools of vision, environmental ordering, spatial projection are made available to the community, the places they know as the space of their life’s experience can be seen with detached fascination of Baudelaire’s maps framed by lamplight, and transformed. Seizing the means for simulating a panoptic vision that could draw them out of the perpetual labyrinth of event, community residents entered into the academy, not just as observers or as research subjects, but as essential participants in the reconstructive and speculative undertaking which is at the heart of a creative education.

NOTES

- ¹ Baudelaire, Charles, “Le Voyage” in *Les fleurs du mal*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Generale Francaise, 1972, p.57. Translation mine.
- ² Barthes, Roland, *Empire of Signs*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 36
- ³ Palmer, Parker, “Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing: Ways to Deepen our Educational Agenda,” in J. Kendall and Associates, *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service*, National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1987, p. 107
- ⁴ Ibid. p. 108
- ⁵ I gratefully acknowledge the collaboration and important intellectual contributions of my colleagues at Temple University, and fellow Principle Investigators in the Department of Education Grant, especially Professor John Collins, Chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture and Horticulture, Professor David Glasser, former Director of the Architecture Program, Professor C. William Fox, the Director of computing in Architecture, Dr. Jack Greene from Center for Public Policy, Dr. Susan Wheelan, Director of the Center for Psycho-educational Processes, and Dr. Nancy Henkin, Director of the Center for Intergenerational Learning, who is an inspiring advocate for experiential learning in higher education.

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