

# Architecture Design Studio: Community as Inquiry

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*"When a Student enters the specialized world tends to ignore his/her own experience about architecture. The usual creative method of teaching architecture consists in isolating the students from their own experience and to bring them to an abstract world. From there they are supposed to create solutions that modify a context that is not very well understood. This distance between life experience and project, typical in formal teaching of architecture, is extended later into professional practice, which in many occasions gets away from everyday needs seeking transcendence in an abstract order. Understanding architecture as a language proved to bring new possibilities to understand and teach architecture, one of them was to take into account the student's own lived experience as the starting point in the learning process"*<sup>1</sup>

Alberto Saldarriaga, Translated from: *La Arquitectura Como Experiencia*, Villegas Editores, Bogotá, 2002

## Introduction

The Architect's destiny is to work closely with communities, developers and public officials in the transformation of complex sites into places to live, work and interact. Fostering an equitable building environment in the 21st. century demands architects to be aware of their specific role and to be able to convey it clearly to the other players in the collective enterprise of city building. Its like a four-party (one-court) game in which, according to the rules, we have to inform the site, interpret the program and mediate between the other parties when there is a conflict, allowing them to understand better the spatial characteristics

of a given zoning, or empower them to express themselves in a technical and creative way. Nevertheless, beyond the rules, we also can play the sensible role of envisioning new solutions for contemporary living. Only with strong knowledge, convictions and passion can architects fit well into the process allowing for the blossoming of the techniques and the poetic nature of architecture.

This paper expresses a reflection on my experience for the last 6 years as project manager, planner and professor of architecture working closely with communities and students discovering common links and opportunities for mutual learning, developing strategies to involve local communities in urban planning and trying to find out how architecture can play a catalytic role in urban development.

## Community Design Studio as Architecture Expression

Since the last NAAB visit in 2003, the Department of Architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology has been involved in a profound curricula transformation, updating their facilities, hiring new faculty and improving the quality of education. As a result, last spring, the Department obtained a very positive report from the National Architecture Accreditation Board. Among the highlights of the newly accredited curriculum, the Department transformed the old 4th.-year Housing Studio into the new ARCH561: Housing and Community Design Studio (HCD), requiring students to prepare the program and select the site, working in real case studies with community organizations playing the role of the client. With the help of the Wentworth office of Community Service and Learning, this

studio has been developing a trajectory as a community design resource center open to Boston local communities.

Last year the Department of Architecture in partnership with the office of Community Service and Learning was awarded a grant by the Boston Foundation for Architecture to develop an introductory design summer program for High School students from surrounding communities. The program was exciting for the kids and their parents, but also represented the first opportunity for our architecture HCD students to teach and practice their community service learning.

For the last three years, in the fall semester, Wentworth 4th.-year B ARCH students have been working close to Boston middle-class neighborhoods helping them to envision their local planning processes. Most recently, in the summer of 2006, other international schools of architecture have been incorporated, increasing exchange and interdisciplinary participation to a more comprehensive approach to neighborhood design.

The Studio in partnership with a community organization selects the site and develops the program. Each year we chose a different neighborhood based in different needs. Students, working as a team investigate the history, context and previous planning efforts in the neighborhood. As teams, they propose an urban design strategy, defining individual parcels and programs, always relating their work to a larger scale plan. This approach fulfills the pedagogical requirement of a comprehensive design, offering tools in different scales to empower residents to envision and implement the future shape of their neighborhood.

The faculty has been selected according to a wide range of diversity, combined with professional practice and teaching experience. So far instructors have been a mix of full time and adjunct professors and we have worked as a team in many activities, sharing responsibilities to increase exposure to the students. The entire fourth year studio is divided into four sections of a maximum of 12 students. Each instructor is responsible for one section. The four sections, working as a team, develop a comprehensive site analysis, review international precedent projects and present to the community an urban design proposal. In

the second part of the semester, each student develops his/her mixed-use project on a separate parcel, according to their own section's design guidelines. The final goal is to create a comprehensive district vision out of individual designs, in the same way that musicians in an orchestra can interpret a symphony out of their individual instruments.

From my previous teaching experience, I knew architecture students can develop sophisticated graphic and model making skills, but what I have discovered in this studio is that most of them are very well suited to interpret community needs and tend to be more creative and enthusiastic when they are solving real problems. It has been a great satisfaction to observe mostly sub urban, 21-years old students presenting new ideas about density, smart growth, universal design and transit oriented development with such conviction and passion.

### **Studio Goals and Objectives**

The Housing and Community Design studio allows students to explore the potential of community relationships in design projects within the context of a real neighborhood and with the advice of local and city organizations. The specific objectives are:

- To analyze urban places with the interaction of people's lives and their experience of belonging to their community
- To build strong partnership with neighborhood organizations, bringing community process into the Design Studio
- To experience the public realm, learning from conflict. Public design processes always generate conflict between the actors. Usually before reaching consensus between developers, neighbors and city agencies, the process generates tension.
- To integrate architecture and urban design, developing new ideas and ways of communicating them to the community
- To investigate our own contributions in bringing concepts of dwelling, home, and people's stories to the decision-making and design process in order to advance the relationship of design to the cultural,

historical, and social influences in people's lives

- To include a thorough understanding of urban housing and related site planning, housing program development, mixed-use community facilities program development, environmental design and building systems
- To broaden analytical skills and to think about design and architecture in a more rigorous, imaginative way
- To explore new information and innovative approaches, and to examine alternative ways of seeing, alternative ways of designing, and alternative technologies and communication techniques
- To foster a sense for community in the studio, encouraging students to learn from each other and to share their experiences as well as resources in a mutually supportive environment

### **Three Boston Sites and their Community Organizations**

Boston is a city rich in urban life and has a long history of community activism. Modern community organizations or CDCs were born here in the late sixties and early seventies as a response to the Urban Renewal program<sup>2</sup>. Originally, the purpose was to oppose demolition of old neighborhoods to build high-rise housing. In the last three decades their general focus has shifted to community organizing, affordable housing and economic development. Their influence in the Boston urban landscape has been mostly in preserving the historic neighborhoods, transforming old buildings into new housing and controlling private real state development. Very few organizations have devoted their mission to a new urban vision, shared by the residents and transformed into a plan. Living and participating as an activist in the Fenway, sharing the vision and working three years for Fenway CDC gave me the inspiration to implement the first Community Design Studio.

#### **1. Fenway CDC and the Urban Village Plan**

The first semester, continuing my previous practice as community planner in that organization, students were able to take the

West Fenway as the site and the Fenway CDC as the client in order to develop a prototype interpretation of their newly approved zoning. This community represents a variety of household income, ethnicity's, cultures, and interests, including seniors, and persons with disabilities, property owner, tenants, families, students, and young professionals. The Fenway is a very well defined, 1.5 square-mile area with over 33,000 residents. Fenway CDC acts as a catalyst for change by supporting Fenway residents who are very active and want to better their community.

In 2000, in response to the Boston Red Sox's plans to build a new stadium in the neighborhood, residents responded with a proposal that was developed over the previous ten years called the "Urban Village Plan" (UVP). The proposed ballpark would supplant a large commercial section of the Fenway (Boylston Street)-the same area the UVP designated ripe for "smart" redevelopment. The UVP calls for mixed income housing, improved public transportation and pedestrian access, increased open space, a restored Muddy River (part of Fredrick Law Olmsted's famed "Emerald Necklace"), a community center, and a new school. In the summers of 2000 and 2003, Fenway CDC organized community design Charrettes that explored and developed the renovation possibilities of Fenway Park and design ideas for five parcels along the Boylston Street corridor. In the fall of 2004, Wentworth CDH Studio, working closely with Fenway CDC, following directions from the UVP developed a comprehensive plan for 16 parcels along Boylston and Van Ness Street in the West Fenway to replace a typical sub urban strip of fast food stores, parking lots and gas stations.

Students proposed infill projects in interrelated parcels, keeping historic buildings and the most stable uses. They developed comprehensive design for each parcel and built together a four-block (10 x 3 feet) model that incorporated all their solutions in one big piece of a city, including the renovated old Fenway Park. In conclusion, the students learned from the community process and the community learned from the student's passion and design skills.



Fig. 1: Fenway CDC: Final Review Team Work, December 8, 2004

In 2005, SURDNA foundation from New York awarded Fenway CDC a grant to continue developing the Urban Village Plan and the students work was capital in helping to keep the energy of the community in the long process.

## 2. North Allston Triangle

In the fall semester of 2005, HCD Studio used the North Allston Triangle as a laboratory to test new housing typologies in an urban transition between Harvard University property and local residential districts. The studio was based on the North Allston: Vision for a Neighborhood Strategic Plan, elaborated by the Boston Redevelopment Authority and the Interim Report: PHYSICAL FRAMEWORK CONCEPTS FOR ALLSTON, presented by Harvard University in June 2005<sup>3</sup>. This report states that the realization of Harvard's long-term vision for Allston will require a close partnership between the University and the broader public. Harvard has promised to continue actively to seek guidance from neighborhood and academic institutions, but the result is far from satisfying minimal community demands.

The Riverview Triangle forms the western gateway to North Allston, between Birmingham Parkway and Soldiers Field Road. Today it houses large retail stores and their parking lots, which has the potential for significant new housing, academic, research, and other uses accessible from Harvard's campus. (Figure 3: North Allston Site Visit)

Within a tight political and physical context, the Studio worked closely with Hobart Park Neighborhood Association and Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation following their mission to engage neighborhood residents in an on-going process of shaping and carrying out a common vision for a diverse and stable community.



Fig. 2: Allston, Site Visit, September 9, 2005

The studio final proposal linked the North Allston Triangle to the stable residential areas, included a new Commuter Rail Station and pedestrian plazas above Massachusetts Turnpike to minimize the impact of the highway. The final projects proposed high density, mixed-uses with strong housing component and a Community Center, with open space with pedestrian oriented development. The community representatives were not completely satisfied with the proposed density, because most of them still think this area needs to keep the suburban character and the existing uses.

In the 2005 studio we discovered that, in working with CDCs, its important for students to organize the community outreach by themselves. They should prepare the meetings, visit the people in their houses and integrate themselves with the community in order to build credibility in advance. It's important to make long-term partnerships and have a longer educational follow-up process to ensure a good community feed back.

## 3. Roslindale Village Main Street

Roslindale Village is a vibrant urban neighborhood with a variety of new and

established businesses and restaurants. The Roslindale Design Committee has spent many years working on defining the town image. Before working with Wentworth, they sponsored a study by MIT's Department of Urban Studies & Planning to plan the Village's center. The study focused on issues of communication and image at a pedestrian scale. They proposed to create gateways by "announcing the visitor's arrival into the Village by clearly demarcating entry points and portray a memorable identity of Roslindale Village to residents and visitors"<sup>4</sup>.

In the spring 2006, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, working together with community organizations, started the Roslindale strategic planning and zoning process. We proposed to work together with Roslindale Village Main Street Design Committee to develop ideas for several key parcels that have been abandoned for a long time, testing new uses and densities that will serve as the basis for the new zoning.

This year we expanded the scope of the studio to a sequence of different pedagogic experience at different levels. The partnership with Roslindale started with an International Urban Design Summer Studio, as part of the International Cooperation Agreement signed between Wentworth Institute of Technology and the Universidad Central de Venezuela. Between July 17 and August 11, 2006, a class

of 12 students and three faculty members from the UCV's urban design masters degree visited Boston and develop the first part of the plan initiating the site analysis and urban design proposal for the Roslindale Neighborhood. This way communities receive input from several institutions and the fact that they come from different backgrounds ensures the credibility and the continuity of the project.

The Venezuelan students worked full time, in an intensive four-week studio and presented their findings for a department/community review the final week of the Summer Semester. Their research, analysis, insight and original graphic documentation was the base for the 2006, Wentworth Community Design studio. This program has been sponsored by the Global Education Opportunities Committee (GEO) and Wentworth Office of Community Relations and Service Learning.

Following the UCV urban design guidelines, Wentworth 4th.-year students will be committed to develop schematic design proposals for mixed-use projects at the stripe of land between Adams Park and Healy Baseball Field, along Washington Street, according to a comprehensive district visions prepared by the Venezuelan students. The community will use this work to test design ideas for the larger community scale plan and future zoning.



Figure 3: Students with Janice Williams, Roslindale Village Main Street Executive Director

### Community Design: Space and People in Search of a Place

The word 'site' comes from 'situs', an expression that has a dual connotation: in one hand, it designates a space within a particular location, dimensions and other physical characteristics, in the other, also implies 'situation' which means some type of activity happening on a particular span of time. The Webster dictionary defines it as "a place where something exists or originates." In the same direction, Anne Whiston Spirn points out in *The Language of Landscape*: "Territory is established by the limits of the processes, which create it. A watershed is a territory

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Herman Hertzberger, a well-known architect from Holland, in his 2001 Lecture at MIT<sup>6</sup>, made some statements that deserve further considerations. He said that internationally renowned architects seem to be competing among themselves to make the most beautiful objects just to be published in the magazines, forgetting that the main purpose of their work is to design space. Space is intangible, very difficult to catch in a photograph, but it is the primary material of architecture and urban design. To describe with words or images a good space is almost impossible. Paradoxically enough, it is easy to describe a bad space. Remarkable spaces are difficult to describe in rational words, they can only be perceived in site as you visit them. Meanwhile, places are described by the activity that 'takes place' within those spaces. Good houses or a cities are able to be narrated better as a place, though the activity, than as a space in pure form. People interacting with a space, create the place.

Hertzberger described the case of an architect who was designing a beautiful garden for a certain site. He waited until the final drawings were finished to show it to the community, who then completely rejected the project. The people's reaction against the project came about because they were not taken into account. So, the people decided to design the garden as a committee, and they did it the best they could. The incident was painful from the architects point of view, because a better project could have been built and the architect lost his job, but it was good for the people because from there, they increased the sense

through which water flows to a particular stream or river; a tidal zone is a territory created by sea's ebb and flow. The boundaries of both are marked by extent of movement. A habitat is an area within which an animal forages and mates; a nation is the domain in which authority dictates that certain actions proceed in certain ways according to law. Paths, boundaries, and gateways are conditions, not things, spatial patterns defined by processes. Paths are places of movement, boundaries limits to movement, gateways places of passage and exchange. A path is maintained by movement. Once a process ceases, space becomes a shell of past practices."

of community and had to learn the basic tools for designing their own garden. This shows how an individual failure can be transformed into a collective success.

In the cases we have been involved there is a consensus that architects and communities have to work together. As the process goes on, it is important to find a new methodology, one that shifts to the people the responsibility of making it while learning. Meanwhile, the architect has to learn to take into account this variable. In the process of teaching the community, both have to be open for learning. The architect has to read and interpret how the community responds, translating into their own language all his knowledge about natural and urban space, construction techniques and materials, in such a way that can be transformed and incorporated as a tool for them to use.

Hertzberger also said in his conference, "the new paradigm in education is a social one". He meant we have to teach students to get along with each other, to teach communities how to live together. Only then, we can pretend to shape space into place. He said that every building should be approached as urban design: "To design a school is like designing a city." School is the place where students learn to relate with each other and with their community. I would like to add that the opposite is valid as well: "designing a city is like designing a school". The purpose is to educate the people to live together, to value the space and to be able to become better individuals. As an architect, knowing the tools of shaping space, we have the responsibility to shape a community, and as for the community,

they have the responsibility to show the architect how to do it.

There is a difference between space, site and place. Space is an abstract concept and can be empty (exactly as architects like their buildings to appear in the photographs). Sites and places add all the possibilities of human activity in different combinations that can make a location unique every time. Like in the alchemical process, the right measures in the proportion between activity and space makes the difference, transforming a rough element into gold. Empty spaces will always be looking in search of people to become places.

I would like to conclude mentioning a nearby example: Commonwealth Avenue in Boston is a remarkable public space maintained by the people who have lived there for many years, and also by the will of the city as a whole, through laws and regulations that have kept this space almost as it was one hundred years ago. Humans made it house-by-house and tree-by-tree. Before building and planting, there was a plan, which was the product of the desire of different generations of people at the end of nineteenth century, including architects, politicians and developers.

None of them imagined that such quiet and traditional strip of space would be transformed into something completely different, every third Monday of April, by the celebration of the Boston Marathon. On day in the spring this historical site becomes a feast of energy and life, when 20,000 plus runners pass through it in search of the final line. A few days later, as life continues flowing in the spring, the blossom of the magnolias in the edges of the street brings a sense of renewal every year. A similar transformation happens in the fall at the Charles River near Harvard, when the Head of the Charles Regatta transforms a quiet river into a big party of life, colors and movement that follows the foliage of the trees in the fall. Both events, at the peak of two opposite seasons, worship the triumph of a good relationship between human and nature in a city that attracts more tourists for the variety and energy of their community and places than for the beauty of its monuments. A good space does not necessarily know what type of place it is going to be, but it has to have the conditions to accept to be invaded by any activity that brings it to life. A beautiful space without people means nothing and a potential

community without place does not have the chance to exist. Community, communication and communion have the same origin.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I translated this paragraph from: Saldarriaga, Alberto, "La Arquitectura Como Experiencia: Espacio, Cuerpo y Sensibilidad, Villegas Editores, Bogotá, 2002. (p. 22)

<sup>2</sup> Urban Renewal was controversial program in the US, as it often implies the use of eminent domain law to enforce reclaiming private property for civic projects. In 1961, Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, one of the first—and strongest—critiques of contemporary large-scale urban renewal. However, it would still be a few years before organized movements began to oppose urban renewal.

<sup>3</sup> Cooper, Robertson & Partners' Interim Report: PHYSICAL FRAMEWORK CONCEPTS FOR ALLSTON, presented by Harvard University in June 2005

<sup>4</sup> Revitalizing Urban Main Streets: Roslindale Village, Department of Urban Studies & Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Spring 2005

<sup>5</sup> Spirn, Anne Whiston. *The Language of Landscape*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Hertzberger, Herman, a well-known architect from Holland, in his MIT, Arthur Schein Memorial Lecture: The Architect and Space, April 10, 2001