

The New Orleans Studio: Rebuilding the Broadmoor Community Center

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Occupants of New Orleans are deeply attached to their neighborhoods. This is in part due to the associations with cultural identity. Each neighborhood has a historical narrative connected to the cultural discourses defining black/white, Creole/American, and catholic/protestant identity. These dialectics reinforce each other and contribute to the sense of place and connections to the past on which the city thrives. In the *Aesthetics of Equity*, Craig Wilkins discusses the production of space and its relationship to particular identities. "Social activities facilitate the production and representation of both the place and the characteristics of the spatial relationships of any particularly defined group of people" (Wilkins, 2007). The political struggle between Creoles and Americans in New Orleans and later between the white and black community, has made this association of place with culturally rooted activities and storytelling a powerful self-identifying element of occupying particular areas of the city.

New Orleans is undergoing a transformation. The actions of individuals will have a dramatic effect on the new urban landscape of the city as inhabitants re-create place through their continued occupation or absence. Occupation in this case goes beyond simple presence, but refers to the re-remembering of place that takes place through the culturally charged performances of place, which are a part of the city's history. The focus of the initial plans for reconstruction has been on the French Quarter and other tourist areas, which are on high ground. Efforts to revive the culture have had a similar focus, as increasing cost of permits for block parties and second-lines have made it very difficult for already struggling communities to practice their traditions. The culture of New Orleans cannot be preserved only in the increasingly corporatized French Quar-

ter. Although the geography of New Orleans suggests that there are parts of the city which can be saved and parts which will continue to face flooding and destruction, the culture which defines the city, suggests an entirely different map, which is highly correlated to the areas of poverty and underserved communities.



Figure 1. This map shows the shifting grid of the city. The area of Broadmoor we focused on is highlighted in blue. The site of the community center is shown in red. The blocks immediately surrounding the community center are the original location of the black community of this neighborhood. The area highlighted in blue represented the community that will be served by the community center on a daily basis. This area is characterized by 12.5 % unemployment, 75% black, and 40% below the poverty level.

This paper will focus on a collaborative design process involving students at the University of Utah and the Broadmoor Improvement Association. Broadmoor is located in the center of the radial structure of New Orleans street grid. This area is

one of the most diverse neighborhoods of the city in spite of its internal divisions. Napoleon bisects most of the area dividing a more affluent white, professional population from a poor, black, working class area which was established as a community of servants in 1930's when a few black families built homes here which are still part of the fabric today. The BIA has made an effort to include every citizen in its redevelopment process. The University of Utah worked with the BIA to redesign the Broadmoor Community Leadership Center, an old piecemeal community building which remains an empty husk following Hurricane Katrina. The site is located at the center of the poor section of the neighborhood and will serve this community.

The goal of the process of design we engaged in was to create a holistic image of this community through the redevelopment of this building. This paper will look at the process of design by first describing the concept of performative theory of place and then explore how this idea helped students understand the connection people have to place in New Orleans, How these ideas played out in the design process, and how it is manifest in the final designs presented to the Community. The New Orleans Studio provides a model of architecture as a service profession creating a focus on community collaboration and shifting the role of the architect from primary author to facilitator. The responsibility of the architect to the community is not intended to undermine the importance of the architectural object. On the contrary, the relationship of building to context, community, and place becomes more critical. Students are asked to take responsibility for the studio and critically evaluate the role of the architect in this context. Connections of architecture to this culture and the richly detailed tapestry of the context are a challenge to the idea of architecture as an isolated object. Representatives of the community remain a part of the design process through informal contacts, the studio web site, and the formal competition review and final presentation in New Orleans.

PERFORMATIVE THEORY OF PLACE

One of the goals of this project is to use performative theory to study the City of New Orleans as it is rebuilt, and to use the city of New Orleans to study performative theory and its potential impact on the process of design. The history of New Orleans and

the continuing influence of myths and rituals of Creole culture allow the city to be the 'drag queen' for understanding place identity as performative. Judith Butler states, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler, 1999). My hypothesis is that the self-conscious performances of culture and identity used to mark place in New Orleans, reveal the performative structure of place. The structure of this relationship is clearly illustrated in New Orleans. The map of New Orleans is regulated by a public discourse, which has its origins in characterizations of race, gender, and class through Creole identity. This discourse is solidified by actions, which in turn reinforce the boundaries defined by the construction of images of Creole people and black culture. Therefore, the myth of Creole identity is still strongly reflected in the map of New Orleans and the image of the French Quarter, which supports the city's tourist industry today. This structure can be used to analyze and understand the relationship between gender/race/cultural identity and place. Further it may also suggest a technique, which allows these issues to be incorporated into a process of urban analysis and eventually design.

Place may be defined as the repeated acting-out of place in daily occupations. Place is performed by individuals through the repetition of habits, actions, clothing, styles of speech, etc. in their daily occupation of a space. Although this process is governed by the discourse which defines gender and race, this formulation allows for individuals to shape both the discourse and the space through their actions; either solidifying an identity by re-enacting it or transforming an identity by acting-out against it. A performative theory of place must focus on conscious performances, actions that have the potential to be transformative. A focus on unconscious actions will rely too heavily on interpretation, however a conscious action, acting out, or retelling is more clearly intended to define identity and is more capable of marking or claiming place. This principle acknowledges that the actions that define cultural identity are influenced by and help to define place. "What begins here is the active creation of space and a challenge of place ... This challenge of space and place is fueled by the realization of both as activated by bodies that interact" (Wilkins, 2007). In addition this theory allows the focus of race and gender theories in architecture to shift from the identity itself and notions of experience that have

been criticized for being too subjective, to the discourse which defines the identity and the conscious actions within the routines of contemporary urban life that embody this discourse.

New Orleans is fertile ground for this type of study because it is a graphic example of the negotiation of place and identity, both historically and today. The performance of identity is essential to navigating the highly regulated map of contemporary New Orleans. Boundaries change abruptly from one block to the next, inciting performances both violent and defensive in nature. Traditions developed by the 1850's, such as dance, carnival, and mimicry, and unique traditions of storytelling, as well as a history of cultural conflict and the sexualization of identity have been integral to the development of the cultural map of this city. "When identity is performed, then the space in which that performance takes place can be seen as a stage. After a certain number of performances that stage will no longer be neutral. It will be imbued with associations of the activities that took place there" (Leach, 2006). The fabric of the city of New Orleans reinforces cultural definitions and their impact on the performance of identity and tradition. A series of colliding grids that once defined plantation land and patterns of ownership of the elite social classes of the city delineate particular neighborhoods. These shifting patterns mark the boundaries of community so distinctly that place identity is a part of the experience of walking through the city. The clarity of these boundaries and the cultural identification with place are so strong that the practice of camouflage, as defined by Neil Leach is a standard part of moving through and surviving in the city of New Orleans. Leach states, "Camouflage acts as a devise for us to define the self against a given cultural setting through the medium of representation ... either by becoming part of the setting or by distinguishing ourselves from it" (2006). This process of self-definition is acted out in New Orleans through the representations of blackness or whiteness. Walking from one territory to another an individual will shift their performance of cultural identity through acts such as the tilt of their head, the rhythm of their walk, and gestures of greeting as traditions of speech and gesture shift from one place to another. The strength of connections between identity and place in New Orleans can be seen in each communities struggle to perform their traditions as part of a claim to survival. Their per-

formance is once again a competition for a place in the city. This acting-out has all the force of a self-conscious performance of identity and a self-conscious performance of place.

THE NEW ORLEANS STUDIO

The First stage of the New Orleans Studio design process was a visit to the site. Students spent time in both the Broadmoor area and in the city. Just driving through the streets students began to recognize the correlation with neighborhood boundaries and the shifting grid of the city. The map of New Orleans is a patchwork of contrasting grids, providing a series of distinct fields with clear boundaries, each of which is a community with its own history and cultural traditions contributing to the culture of the city as a whole. These fields defined initially by plantation and property lines came to be known for the unique communities who lived there, American, Creole, former slaves, and free people of color. Each of these communities has engaged in New Orleans traditions of cultural production to put themselves on the social and political map of the city. Along these shifts were clear changes in the density of the city fabric. Indicating changes in class often accompanied by changes in race and cultural identification.

Students engaged occupants of these areas in interviews both formal and informal. The patterns of storytelling are striking and reveal both a sense of identification with place and a particular set of cultural traditions. Stories told in the Broadmoor area immediately surrounding the cultural center site focused on the American slave culture that came into the city following the civil war. This community struggled to form neighborhoods during Jim Crow segregation building in areas that were undesirable.

(Nuisances) in New Orleans' back-of-town included flooding, mosquitoes, miasmas (stagnant air associated with unhealthiness), unpaved streets, open sewage and garbage dumps ... Other features correlated with black residency were the numerous irregular sliver shaped blocks wedged in and between orthogonal subdivisions, created by piecemeal development of uptown New Orleans from long-lot plantations (Campanella, 2006).

Black families built homes in these areas in defiance of the white community who continued to see them as less than human. Building a house and

living with dignity is an act of defiance and cultural reconstruction that cannot be denied in this place. Building on these boundaries is another visible expression of city fabric that clearly marks territories. The richness of these cultural traditions depend on a process of evolution which connects place to specific and detailed processes of palimpsestically altering dominant spatial traditions to create ownership and identification with specific well defined territories. In these places choice, agency, and belonging are linked to the fabric of the city.

The first plan of the city eliminated the Broadmoor neighborhood. The residents rejected the plan, acting-out resistance by their very presence, occupying their space in spite of the lack of infrastructure, and through their cultural performances and storytelling. The occupation of a flood-damaged house was an act of defiance. Occupying a place that had been erased from the map of the city and was in danger of being torn down was for some the remembering of the struggle of the black community to claim space in the city following the civil war. One resident of the Broadmoor neighborhood lived in her house alone on an army cot, with no water or electricity or services on an abandoned block for almost two years. She traveled on the bus to Baton Rouge to bathe and replenish her supplies. She tells the story of how her father built the house in an empty field between two white communities in which he worked. He was not welcome in these areas after dark. He built his house in defiance, appropriating the site for himself and his family. The simple shotgun house was the first of many in this space between. The process of storytelling unique to New Orleans culture creates a woven tapestry of place identity. The struggles of the black community to find a place in the new city recalls the struggles of their ancestors to build a neighborhood which would become a foundation for both family and community in the face of discrimination and Jim Crow segregation. This story reveals to students the strength of the identification this community has with place and its attempts to understand and reconcile the tragedy of Katrina, as community members are confronted by the fragmented landscape, which continues to surround them.

The growth of this black community created a denser grid of dwelling in contrast to the surrounding communities, a boundary that is still visible today. The connection of family identity, to a cultural

history of claiming the margin as a place to live with dignity in a city that abused its black citizens is relived through the simple act of sleeping in a damaged house, claiming the space and the right to survive and rebuild.

"Through the repetition of those rituals, these spaces are "re-membered," such that those participating reinscribe themselves into the space, reevoking corporal memories of previous enactments. The space becomes a space of projection, as memories of previous experiences are "projected" onto its material form. At the same time, the body becomes the site of introjection, as a recording surface registering those previous spatial experiences" (Leach, 2006).

The relationship of the action to the story is a performance rooted in memory and the power of claiming an unwanted space. This resident is the marshal of the block, repeating the names of all the families who live here, telling the story of her community to anyone willing to listen, as a way to rebuild her community. Students spent the day with the marshal of the block and learned of the struggles of the people whose homes remained empty.

Students heard these stories in every area they visited. In most cases the occupants chose a place, their homes, which did not exist in the new plans for the city, to create a place of hope and celebration. The homes began to reconstruct the city including communities, which were erased in dwelling and storytelling. A choice made out of desperation became a celebration of the cultural history of New Orleans. These stories are repeated throughout the city. "Since the other hesitated to recognize me there remained only one solution: to make myself known" (Fanon, 1967). History is relived and retold as the places of the city are reconstructed through the actions of individuals who re-claim place with their stories and cultural history. This process of telling and retelling a place inspired students. The projects we developed all focused on providing a space for the citizens to continually recreate the story of this place as their own. After Katrina plans which proposed allowing the low lying areas of the city to revert to park land eliminated predominately black areas of the city. In fact there is only one area of the city that got eight feet or more of water, which was slated to be rebuilt, and that was a white upper middle class neighborhood. The strong identification with place and its association with cultural pride require another look at the city. Plans that focus only on traditional images of sustainability,

in this case a focus primarily on topography do not produce a sustainable city. New Orleans has been supported for many years by its tourist industry. Only a plan, which is capable of maintaining the history, culture and the foundations of the tourist industry, can be considered truly sustainable.

This grass roots design process is appropriate for a city whose culture rests on the appropriation and control of spaces for the celebration of subaltern identities. "African Americans have historically been required to employ what ever means available to them to transform space in a strategy for simple survival. Understanding space as something created by social interactions is a radically different view of space ... and affords designers an alternative framework to thinking about their work that can be employed to validate African-Americans in space" (Wilkins, 2007). This view will allow the people of New Orleans opportunities to reinvent both their city and their cultural lives. This is the only way to provide the city and its tourist industry with the foundations it needs to maintain a living culture based on the real lives of the occupants of this place.

DESIGN PROCESS

Following the experience of these place students returned to the studio to design the community center. "The time spent investigating Broadmoor and the lives of its residents provided students

with an opportunity to initiate the design process with multiple perspectives and provide a vision for the viable redevelopment of the community center. Rather than create designs that ultimately would impose a new culture upon the residents of Broadmoor the students' engagement of the community enabled the development of design schemes which could become significantly more indigenous to the cultural fabric of the community" (Sommer). In addition to the cultural ideas they also developed a list of priorities based on the conversations they had with community members and members of the Broadmoor Improvement Association. The program was then developed in relationship to these issues. The community expressed a desire to create a building which was not only efficient but had the ability to operate as a first responder location which meant that certain functions had to be run off the grid of the city in the case of a loss of power. Because the building could not be lifted, due to its existing foundation and its scale, the students had to plan into each scheme the possibility that the lower floor would be flooded, and then be recovered as quickly as possible.

Although we discussed affordability, the community agreed that the primary use of this process was to create a vision for the community, which could be used to raise funds for the project, therefore, the budget was not a primary consideration for the first phase of design; however, the feasibility in relationship to structure and systems was cru-

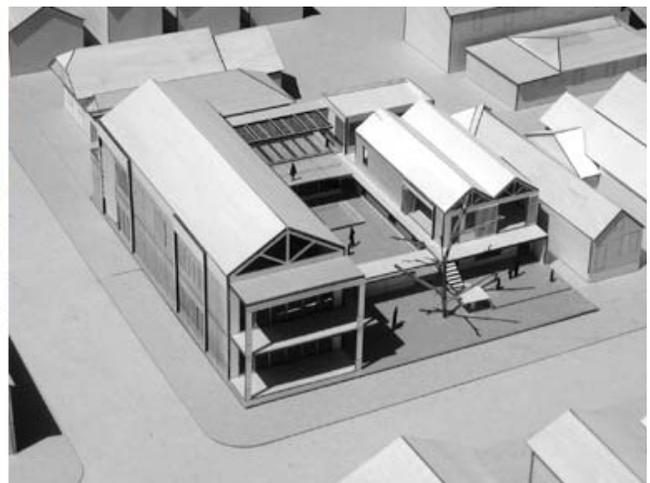


Figure 2. This image shows two of the winning schemes by: Preston Croxford, Michael Sommer, Sara Staffanson and Soonju Kwon, Gerald Maurer, Brittany White Johnson. Both schemes rely heavily on the vernacular of the area and the ideas of providing public space to be appropriated by the community.

cial. In addition students got a clear understanding of who would be using the building on a daily basis and also the community's desire to be able to use the building in the context of larger block parties, which would celebrate the entire community. The emphasis on creative programs, including a recording studio and art studio was introduced to facilitate the ability of the community to transform the building, express its identity and concerns, and allow the children of the community an outlet for their emotional response to Katrina through cultural production.

The studio was run as competition. Students each developed a scheme through the schematic design stage and then we invited members of the community to come the Utah for a competition review. The additional engagement in the middle of the process inspired the students to recommit to the service agenda of the studio. Students worked in groups to develop the chosen schemes as fully as possible. The collaborative process asked students to combine the strength of the many different schemes transforming the winning designs to collectively represent the ideas of the community representatives, and the different students in each team. At the end of the semester students traveled to New Orleans again to present the designs to the community and engage in a critical conversation to evaluate the final designs.

The designs incorporated the inspiration of the initial site visit and the stories they recorded through the concept of appropriation. Each scheme was created to invite the community to appropriate the building as living room, public porch, stage for retelling, gallery for the display of the work produced in the arts program, a mural arts program which incorporate the traditions of graffiti and painting practiced in the city, etc... In addition the students responded to the rich architecture of the area and the issues of sustainability by incorporating vernacular aspects of place to connect to the history of the neighborhood and the people who lived there. By combining aspects of the vernacular architecture with the issues of sustainability and culture, students created buildings that were continuous with the fabric and material palette of the community.

CONCLUSION

This work attempts to reveal a process of creation that incorporates a respect for the community in which we work, while at the same moment allowing us to understand our own location and its impact on the process of design. The New Orleans studio asks students to confront their assumptions about the relationship of identity and space. Students explore their own understanding of critical theory, processes of design and the practice of architecture to expand the thinking and skills they



Figure 3. This picture shows both how the neighborhood is changing due to the flood. Houses are being lifted up to eight feet off the ground. This scheme suggests that the resulting space can be used for community activity. This image also shows the shutters closed in anticipation of a storm.



Figure 4. The idea of the community living room and community porch is the inspiration of this scheme. The vernacular forms are the inspiration for these two spaces, details like shutters allow the space to be opened up to the street. The form of the courtyard allows it to be used as a stage or audience for the telling of community stories and histories. The fine-grained details of the shutters and façade allow the center to be a continuous part of the community.



Figure 5. This scheme uses the changes in the community to create public space. The building facade opens at street level and incorporates mural arts as a means of community expression and identity. This allows the interior space to facilitate more flexible relationships between the building's interior and exterior spaces, providing more meaningful public interaction. The community center design proposes to redefine these new spaces at ground level as gestures towards public inclusion and neighborhood relations. (Sommer)

bring to their work. The students are inspired by a model of architecture as service to community. The studio asks students to consider their relationship to the community they serve and its impact on their own goals as students of architecture. The model of architecture as a service profession is an important motivating factor. The first studio and the collaboration we had with the BIA inspired the community to pursue a more speculative project focused on representing the culture and life of the city. In New Orleans Studio II, students will participate in a collaborative design process to create a

"Collective Memorial" which will be installed in the Broadmoor neighborhood. This project allows the community to interact with an installation to celebrate their culture and tell their stories. The trust and lasting relationship we have developed with the BIA are testament to the quality of the work and the professionalism of the students engaged in the service of this community. Each aspect of the work, performative theory, service to community, and experimental design has strengthened the studio experience for the students.

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