

Community Design in Cuba: Families shaping dwelling

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INTRODUCTION

Cuba's Architects for the Community is a national civic sector community design practice. This unique program provides a model for efforts to make professional design services available to every member of a community or an entire nation. This case study is offered not as a definitive study of the initiative but as a first look at a method for delivering design services that warrants further investigation.

The practice of community design is evolving to meet the changing challenges of low-income communities and our evolving understanding of these issues. Toker [2001,1-2], summarizes the ongoing dialogue about the definition of community design. He concludes: "community design has been the practice of involving people in the decision making process for shaping their environment, and advocating (for) politically powerless low-income communities." One of the constant goals of community design is to provide access to professional design services to low, and in some cases moderate, income people who do not have access to such services.

Many low-income people require technical assistance and design services in conjunction with the construction or repair of their home. Making architectural services available to everyone, of limited means, planning to construct a home or undertake a small improvement project is daunting: 98% of builders in the United States currently do not utilize architects.¹ Given the scale of this issue few design centers have risen to this challenge.² Most centers limit services to targeted groups, projects or advocacy efforts.

National or regional economies with a high education level and a low cash income have a unique opportunity to increase the

quality of life by increasing access to professional services and education. [Sen, 1999 #61] There is also an economic and psychological value to providing individual families with the freedom to shape their home. [Turner, JFC and R Fitcher (ed.), 1972] Cuba's Architects of the Community (a community design center network) provides a model for using design services as an element of a national housing delivery system. In addition to design services for individual projects, Architects for the Community also provides advocacy and planning. Those services and initiatives are not addressed in this paper.

HOUSING IN CUBA

There has been substantial economic recovery in Cuba following the 'special period' created by the changes of government in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Education, health care, food and security are generally of high quality and available to the general population. Access to transportation and employment continues to be problematic and there are occasional food shortages, blackouts and water problems. Since 1991, housing has emerged as Cuba's greatest unmet need. There is a substantial shortage of housing units. The quality of much of the existing housing is poor, although it exceeds that of most Latin American countries.

Housing that was confiscated during the revolution was redistributed to tenants. Two thirds to three-quarters of the housing constructed since the revolution is self-built (the owner serves as general contractor). During the 1960s – despite the fact that official policy favored State constructed housing – about two-thirds of the units produced were self-initiated. In the 1970s and 1980s official policy shifted to promoting self-

building. From 1986-1990 the use of indigenous sustainable materials was expanded. In 1996, 57,000 self-built units were constructed. This number diminished slightly as policy shifted to require higher levels of quality. Production of self-built housing fell precipitously, to only 10% of previous levels, in 2001 following the formal adoption of new regulations.

Most Cuban's (88%) own their own homes. Ownership rights are restricted. Sale is prohibited and exchange and inheritance is regulated. It is estimated that 85% of the housing needs repair or maintenance. [Oxfam Canada, 1998] Housing is generally affordable, although the cost of repairs or new construction is very high due to the cost of imported materials.

ARCHITECTS OF THE COMMUNITY DESCRIPTION

Architects of the Community in Cuba has mission is to provide affordable client responsive design services to all families in Cuba.³ Habitat Cuba, a non-governmental organization (NGO), sponsors Architects of the Community⁴ in partnership with international and local organizations. Habitat Cuba is a non-profit association of professionals from a variety of fields created in 1974. Their work involves town construction; environmental planning and other activities connected with the natural and built environment. Habitat Cuba worked with the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (Cuban Institute for Housing) and other partners to develop the Architects of the Community program.

Architects of the Community's practice is built on the theories of Argentinean architect Rodolfo Livingston. From 1991 to 1994 he presented workshops on his methodologies twice each year with Cuban architect Selma Diaz. Seminars were held in Ciudad Habana, Cienfuegos, Holguin and Guantanamo. The goal of the seminars was to present a methodology that directly involves the client in decision making for their home [Vega, 1998]. Livingston presented the strategy of using architecture to 'surgically' solve problems and help people. This philosophy advocates retaining and preserving the useful elements of the existing built environment. Further the goal is to apply design techniques creatively to meet the clients' expectations and to help them communicate their own ideas. .

The core principle of Architects of the Community is a direct relationship between the client/user and the architect. Clients are individuals or municipalities. Its mission includes responsiveness to environmental conditions, building context and sustainability. The first demonstration of Architects of the Community was conducted in the municipalities of Holguin in 1994. Participating organizations judged this initial experiment to be very successful.

In 1996, coinciding with the Habitat II conference in Istanbul, Turkey, Architects of the Community was introduced national-

ly. A seminar was offered to interested architects and civil engineers. At this training the professionals were introduced to the program's design methodology. Professionals applied for positions in the program. Eventually one professional was assigned to each of 154 municipalities. These Community Architects are State employees although Habitat Cuba supervises their work and training.

SERVICES

Much of the work of Architects of the Community is the provision of full architectural services according to an established methodology that insures client participation.⁵ The majority of clients are owners of single family homes who have limited financial means. Services are delivered using the following process:

1. At a first interview the designer solicits the client's⁶ input using the following steps:
 - Who are the members of the family or building users? What are their ages, interests, employment, etc?
 - What are the worst and best things about your home or facility?
 - What would be the form of your ideal home or facility?
 - The client is introduced to their role of 'attorney' or advocate for their household's needs.
2. The second stage of the services is an analysis of the site and existing building (if any). An inventory of the resources available for the project is also conducted. This usually includes determining the availability of building materials as well as funds. Some architects combine this step with the first.
3. During the third stage the architect conducts an exercise called 'what would I do here?' At least four alternatives for the project are explored, often as many as six.
4. In the next stage design alternatives are presented to the client. Owner input is solicited and carefully recorded.
5. The architect modifies the design based on the feedback received from the client in the previous step.
6. Following client approval of the design, plans and specifications are prepared.
7. Clients hire masons and specialists to build the project.⁷
8. The architect administers construction, performing site visits at specified stages of construction.⁸

Both individuals and municipalities in Cuba require architectural services in order to build, extend or remodel a home or other structure. Drawings and other documentation prepared by a State firm or a community architect is required to receive a building permit. Others services for individual households provided by Architects of the Community are appraisals,

technical reports and various drawings required for legal procedures such as exchange or inheritance.

The method of client engagement/control practiced by the Architects of the Community is consistent with the goals described for community design centers. It begins with the designer listening. [Dean, 1976 #105] It solves a particular environmental problem and it is client, process, and value specific. [Comerio, 1984] It also utilizes gaming techniques to assist clients find voice and creativity [Sanoff, 2000 #99]. The focus of most of Architects for the Community's projects on individual families, rather than civic groups, is almost unique within the community design movement. This difference may be attributed to the nature of social, economic and political organization in Cuba. The community planning aspect of Architects of the Community's appears to be increasing with the growth of the civic sector and decentralization of planning.

PROGRAM OPERATIONS

Each municipality with a population over 10,000 has an Architect of the Community office. These are either formerly vacant commercial space or, more frequently, the Community Architect's home. This model of work outside of a government office provides the practitioner an amount of freedom that is unusual in Cuba.⁹

Professionals in Architect of the Community in Cuba collaborate frequently with their peers. Groups of practitioners meet weekly with others in their area to review their current projects and exchange ideas and expertise. Once a month the practitioners in each of Cuba's 14 provinces assemble to exchange information. A national gathering is held each year. This level of capacity building and reflection among community design practitioners is unique and should be examined for lessons for the practice.

One of the successes of Architect of the Community is the quick turn-around on services. Phase 1 and 2 of services, the interview and site analysis; usually occur within 1-5 days of a request. An additional 5-7 days is invested in phases 3-5, developing design alternatives. Preparation of plans and specifications, in phase 6, usually is accomplished in an additional 7-15 days.

Clients are charged directly for the services of Architect for the Community. Fees are based on a schedule established by the program. The maximum fee for the design of a new home of the maximum allowable area, is 300 pesos.¹⁰ Fees charged for each of the phases of service listed in the preceding description of services on the largest project are: 10.00 pesos for phase 1, the client interview; 30.00 pesos is for phase 2, site and building analysis; 110.00 pesos for phase 3,4 & 5 of schematic design; and one hundred and fifty pesos for phase 6, working drawings

and specifications. An additional fee of ten pesos per site visit is charged for phase 8. This type of schedule of phased payments is viewed as innovative in Cuba.

Also innovative is the method of compensation for professionals. Base compensation is established at 310.00 pesos per month.¹¹ In order to receive this compensation professional are expected to produce 750.00 pesos per month in billings. Architects that exceed this level of production receive a bonus of up to 155.00 pesos per month. This bonus system is a novelty in Cuba where a fixed salary is the norm for professionals.

Fees are used by Habitat Cuba for program expenses and a contribution to the operations of national government. Part of this contribution covers the salaries of the Community Architects. During the first two years of the program 4500 families received assistance [UNESCO Management of Social Transformations Program, 2000].

TRANSITION

Since 1999, responsibility for operation of Architects for the Community has been shifting from Habitat Cuba to the National Institute of Housing. Despite efforts by senior staff to maintain the organization's mission and character, this transition may, diminish or end the client driven character of the practice. Public control may result in more regulation. Professional collegial leadership may be replaced by more bureaucratic top-down leadership. It may also be difficult to maintain professional responsibility and the practice's commitment to continual learning and improvement.

It appears that the transition has been accompanied by the resignation of some members of the core staff and a reduction in the number of young professionals entering the practice. However new partnerships with international organizations, community design centers and universities in the United States of America may also provide more opportunities for Community Architects to participate in planning activities.¹² This may open opportunities for more advocacy type planning. Habitat Cuba is currently involved in planning in Havana.

In 2000 new regulations on self-building were adopted. These rules were intended to improve the quality of housing, ensure that materials are legally procured and eliminate ostentatious building by the 'new rich'. These new rules require documentation of availability of materials, ability to complete the project within a fixed time frame and compliance with design limitations. As a result of these new restrictions self-building declined by 90% in 2001.

CONCLUSION

One of the opportunities available to emerging economies and communities with high unemployment rates and access to professionals with a high level of education is the provision of high quality client responsive professional and educational services. Architectural services provided to individual families have the potential to improve the quality of life for low-income persons by improving the utility of home design for an individual family and site. Using trained individuals to monitor the construction process and developing strategies for using sustainable indigenous materials has the potential to enhance the expenditure of housing and redevelopment funds. Architects for the Community has demonstrated a successful method of delivering architectural services to families with limited means and building the capacity of service providers through ongoing training. Community design can be an important component of a comprehensive community development policy that includes repair or production of housing. As government and NGO housing providers increasingly adopt sites and services models of development, community design could be an essential element of a program that assists community residents to develop livable environments.

The Architect for the Community provides a valuable model for providing comprehensive access to architectural services and providing user based design services. The program demonstrates the value of civic sector organizations in community development. It also challenges industrialized nations such as the United States to reexamine the way in which housing development for low-income communities meet individual needs.

The work of Architects for the Community also has affected the work of the State firms and ministries, which are increasingly adopting more participatory practices and developing richer design strategies in new State building.

Community designers in the US and other nations should explore the lessons of Architects for the Community. How can the profession of Community Design best facilitate repair and construction by low-income people? Are there ways to facilitate additional use of low cost sustainable materials? Have we fully explored the impact of regulation on limiting the opportunities of low-income people?

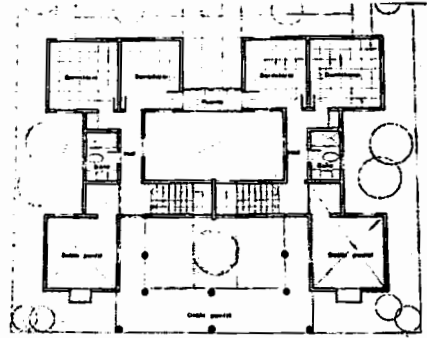
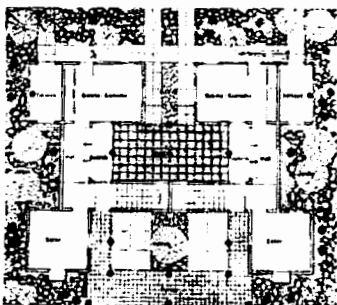
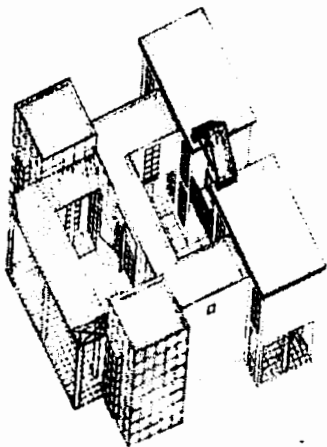
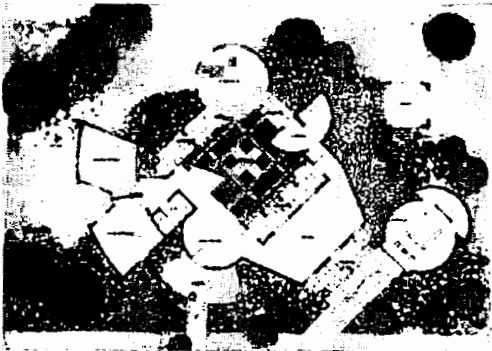
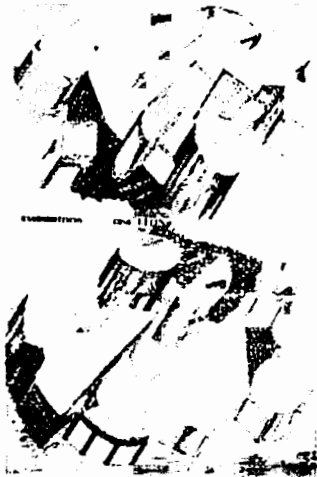
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NOTES

- ¹ Bryan Bell working paper for Structures of Inclusion conference to be held on April 6 and 7, 2002 at Pennsylvania State University, State College PA
- ² Kathleen Dorgan conducted a survey of design centers listed on the ACD web page as part of a research project for the *Design Advisor* in spring of 1999. Only three of the 42 design centers interviewed described efforts to provide universal access to affordable professional services. These are 'TAP' in Troy, NY, Capitol Hill Improvement Corporation in Albany, NY and the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh. Centers reported education projects, advocacy planning, multi-family housing and model home projects.
- ³ The biggest challenge to potential homebuilders is the lack of construction materials. Habitat Cuba is also undertaking research and development to provide sustainable sources of construction materials.
- ⁴ Architects of the Community employed Julio Caesar Perez for five years.
- ⁵ All adult members of the household including teenagers are included in the conversation.
- ⁶ Currently, only licensed professionals can undertake construction in Cuba. There is very limited sanctioned self-help construction.
- ⁷ Prior to pouring the foundation, structural etc.
- ⁸ Self-employment, legal since 1977, was greatly expanded in the 1990s. Most of the licensed masons retained for home construction and rehabilitation are self-employed.
- ⁹ Currently the maximum allowable size of new home in Cuba is 60 sq. meters. Additions are limited to 30 sq. meters.
- ¹⁰ This is an average salary for an architect in Cuba
- ¹¹ Michael Pride-Wells of the University of Kentucky has introduced community design center advocacy planning at several seminars in Cuba.



Casa Samillan San Antonio de los Baños
Two Family Duplex. Designed by Julio Cesar Perez

