# The Seventh Generation

*"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."*
—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

## Is the AIA a Place for Design that Matters?

*By Kathleen Dorgan*

During this year's 2012 American Institute of Architects (AIA) convention in Washington D.C., members left en masse following a standing-room only Gold Medal presentation, leaving the keynote speaker, HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan, to address a half empty ballroom. The remaining audience heard Donovan describe the ways in which federal partnerships are embracing principles of participatory design and neighborhood transformation, many of which were first nurtured within the community design movement with the AIA's support. This history, or a current vision for the role of the AIA in addressing today's critical issues, was conspicuously absent. As demonstrated by the convention audience, the institute's interest in design that matters-the-most is not dependable. This article traces the history of the AIA's relationship with the progressive community design movement and speculates about ways that the AIA could recommit to initiatives to make design matter, including learning from what Jeff Hou, leader of the Pacific Rim Community Design Network, describes as "an explosion of community design in Korea."

AIA engagement in community design resulted from Urban League Executive Director Whitney Young's

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brutal keynote speech at the 100th convention of the AIA in 1968:

> . . . you are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights . . . You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance.

> . . . But I have read about architects who had courage, who had a social sensitivity, and I can't help but wonder about an architect who designs some of the public housing that I see in the cities of this country—how he could even compromise his own profession and his own sense of values to have built 35- or 40-story buildings, these vertical slums, and not even put a restroom in the basement and leave enough recreational space for about ten kids when there must be 5,000 in the building. That architects as a profession wouldn't as a group stand up and say something about this is disturbing to me.

> . . . You share the responsibility for the mess we are in in terms of the white noose around the central city. It didn't just happen. We didn't just suddenly get this situation. It was carefully planned . . .

> It took a great deal of skill and creativity and imagination to build the kind of situation we have, and it is going to take skill and imagination and creativity to change it. We are going to have to have people as committed to doing the right thing, to "inclusiveness," as we have in the past to exclusiveness.

An AIA Task Force on Equal Opportunity, composed, using the terminology and perceived racial dichotomy of the times, of five white and five black members

chaired by David Yerkes, was formed to respond to Young's charges. In its single year of existence, the task force initiated the AIA/Ford Foundation On-the-Job Training (OJT) and scholarship program that went on to successfully support many students of color entering the profession, and published a handbook for local chapters, "Guideline: Community Design Centers."

The nomenclature "community design center" was adopted from the Community Design Center in San Francisco, one of a group of independent non-profit design practices embedded in distressed neighborhoods where students and recent grads were drawing plans and proposing projects with neighborhood residents. Playgrounds, community centers and rehabilitation projects were designed and sometimes constructed with volunteer labor. Active opposition was mounted against neighborhood-scarring highways and "slum" clearance.

At the1969 AIA convention in Chicago, members, who clearly misunderstood the institute's prohibition on the use of free sketches as a marketing tool (since found to be a restraint of trade), argued that community design centers offering pro bono services was unethical. Yet a rousing speech by AIA student-president, Taylor Culver, galvanized the assembly, which pledged $15 million dollars to alleviating urban blight. A new task force, the Task Force on Professional Responsibility to Society, was formed to fulfill this pledge. Robert Nash was chair, Grady Poluard was staff administrator and Hugh Zimmer took leave from the Philadelphia Workshop to work on the task force.

The task force organized seventy-six AIA chapter-partnerships, a conference at Howard University, and action teams dedicated to "seeking out methods of actually changing many of the building restraints that affect the poor." In March of 1970, community design center leaders gathered with private practitioners and government officials, and a "fairly volatile" discussion ensued. Willie Vasquez of The Real Great Society in East Harlem charged: "We're wasting our time; we should be overthrowing the system." Architect and Episcopal priest Taylor Potter complained: "It's pathetic; these

people don't know that to win power in this country you've got to convince the moderates. Your message has to be reasonable." At the conference, an advisory committee of thirteen design center representatives was formed and the task force concluded that "the institute somehow is still living with an inordinate amount of self-serving programs to create a public image and programs which in terms of society's needs are archaic."

Tensions continued at the 1970 AIA convention, where George T. Rockrise revealed, "It sounds really negative to me to say this, because I'm part of the task force . . . [however] . . . I do know the AIA is not fully behind it. I'm sure we are more aggravating to the leadership than helpful." Sanford Goldman of the Architects' Center of Florida suggested that "individual efforts would be more effective than getting bogged down with . . . fundraisers, putting out pamphlets on what we are doing and what we want to do . . . " Harlem community designer Art Simms explained, "I don't think very many architects around the country would really want to deal with political problems that poor communities, black, white or Mexican or Puerto Rican, whatever, have to deal with. So it's a clear point for CD [community design]." Alex B. from San Francisco added, " For white architects to come down to local communities, whether Chinese, black or any other color and say I know the city councilors and I can get you through the zoning changes for this little project, is paternalism, it's white paternalism, and the missionary attitude that low-income communities don't want and reject it. It's about time the white society starts to learn to work with the minority community, work with them and not do things for them. We get sick and tired of you people doing things for us . . . the fact that CDCs gave away free architectural services still appalls some members of the profession, whether or not they realize the clients cannot afford a penny." A speaker from Florida pleaded, "I don't know how to start integrating with the blacks. Can someone help me?"

In July of 1970, Vernon Williams was hired as the AIA community design director. He and a staff, including

Marshall Purnell, who would later become AIA president, began providing technical assistance to community design centers. In September, an AIA administrative realignment led to the formation of a Human Resource Council, headed by Robert Nash and Nathaniel Owings, which was charged with fulfilling the 1969 pledge. Ten large architecture firms represented on the council contributed $10,000 each to supplement membership fees budgeted for AIA staff and administrative expenses in support of the community design centers.

Under the leadership of Williams, the number of design centers expanded and the network of practitioners was strengthened. By 1971, the community design center listing included seventy-four organizations. In 1972, the film "*We Have to Be Able to Do it Ourselves,*" which depicted the energy, excitement, anger and grassroots engagement of community design centers in Cleveland, New Orleans, San Francisco and Philadelphia, was distributed. Yet with the exception of a gift from the Ford Foundation, private fundraising efforts for the AIA initiative stalled. Still, individual centers were beginning to secure funding, including a few grants from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), to support paid staff and increasingly ambitious projects.

Williams led an AIA campaign for federal funding for centers and AIA staff designated for their support. Congress passed legislation, an attachment to a child care bill, which was vetoed by Richard Nixon for reasons unrelated to the community design provisions. This effectively ended the AIA's quest to fulfill its $15 million commitment and began the slow devolution of the AIA/design center partnership. The legacy of this initiative, however, inspired several HUD grants to community design centers during Geno Baroni's stint as assistant secretary during the Carter administration

Beset by recession and declining revenues, AIA leadership withdrew dedicated staff support for community design. The AIA Advisory Committee morphed into the Community Design Directors Association (CDCDA), which was formally incorporated in 1977 and later renamed the Association of Community Design (ACD). Annual gatherings of community designers migrated from AIA headquarters to community locations. AIA staff support declined and effectively ended by the end of the 1970s. In 1980, community design center concerns were incorporated in the AIA's Urban Planning and Design Committee.

The AIA Board of Directors confirmed support of design centers in 1973, 1977, 1982 and then in 1987 pledged, "The AIA supports community design centers and encourages members and components to do community service using community design centers as a vehicle." In addition, principles of participation and community collaboration that developed through community design practice infuse many of the recent publications produced by the AIA and current practice in architecture more broadly. ACD continues as a voluntary association whose membership now includes many university programs. Members, many of whom are major actors in their urban and rural communities, continue to exchange information about projects at an annual conference that includes planners and landscape architects as well as the original architectural constituency. Yet without staff, there is little follow-up on members' desire to share resources, forge partnerships, encourage the growth of the movement, build diversity or impact national policy.

Chuck Turner, executive director of the Community Design Center in San Francisco, who has been active in community design and engaged with the AIA from the initial meeting to the present, sums up the relationship as follows:

> The AIA played an important role in the support and acceptance of community design centers by the profession and government; it was particularly helpful in helping community design centers organize and maintain a network during the early years. In turn, community design centers gave the AIA and profession an active presence in low-income communities and in some ways changed the way the profession acted and was perceived by the public and government. But since the community design centers were not creatures of the AIA—they existed before and in spite of AIA recognition, were not in most cases supported or funded by AIA and were not dependent on AIA for survival—there was always an ambivalence about the relationship. Who could take credit, control and responsibility for the community design center's contribution and existence?

After a long silence, there are indicators of renewed interest in community design at the AIA and within the profession. In 2008, ACD and the AIA Housing and Custom Residential Knowledge Community collaborated on a symposium. The AIA's Communities by Design programs encourage collaboration with community design centers, and the Design Assistance Team's "Program Guidelines for Disaster Response and Recovery Programs" recommends establishing a community design center. The Boston Society of Architects supported the start up of a community design center in 2005 that has attracted over 300 volunteers. HUD experimented with engaging the Universities Rebuilding America Partnerships—Community Design (URAPCD) program in the Gulf Coast. Still, Ambassador Andrew Young's keynote speech at the 2008 AIA convention meeting in Boston, *Forty Years: The Anniversary of Whitney Young's Presentation to the Institute,* didn't mention AIA engagement with community design centers or the accumulated knowledge of almost a half of century of engaged transdisciplinary community design practice.

A recent AIA membership poll funded by the prestigious 2011 Latrobe Prize revealed support for public interest design (an emerging term for socially motivated practice that includes community design) by AIA members. Co-author Bryan Bell notes that an interim report on the research that includes this poll concludes, "Public interest design practices may represent a future trend of architectural practice in general in the U.S. as we adapt to a changed concept of client and changing economic conditions." The Housing Knowledge Community is launching a continuing education program in public interest design in the spring.

Community design is being embraced as a popular and cost-effective strategy in several Pacific Rim nations. The "Green Community Design" conference in Seoul in August 2012 attracted hundreds of students and practitioners. At the conference, public officials described their support of and funding for community design. Current projects in Taiwan include the design of environments to protect the black-faced spoonbill, employing traditional building techniques to rebuild three villages ravaged by Typhoon Marakot and a high school curriculum for teenagers participating in green community development in Old Town Daxi.

In Japan, projects include disaster relief, increasing public participation in agriculture and a system of community flower gardens in Tokyo. South Korea has been especially aggressive in supporting community design projects, such as developing a community role in stimulating the Mapo-gu Pier Commercial District, community-built pocket parks, a Seoul urban forest movement and the Village of Namyangju's development of an eco-tourism strategy. Throughout South Korea there is a proliferation of plantings and art installations designed with and maintained by community members in spaces from highway verges to public parks. The scale of this transformation provides a window into the unrealized potential of community design in the U.S. There is an opportunity for the AIA to reclaim its leadership on this important topic.

Progressive planners can take many lessons from the history of the AIA's interactions with community design that can be applied to practice, policy and teaching. The first comes directly from Whitney Young: professionals are as responsible for what they don't do. A "thunderous silence" describes the AIA (as well as APA, ASLA and USGBC) position on issues of social justice in 2012. The second is that speaking up can make a difference. The AIA members who took up Young's challenge created a sea change within the AIA. Anyone who doubts this should watch *"We Have to Be Able to Do it Ourselves."* This flame can be reignited within our professional organizations. Roberta Feldman and her Latrobe Prize research team have opened a door at the AIA for this conversation. Finally, as evaluators, public officials, consultants and citizens, progressive planners are situated to recommend and plan ways for community design to play a large national role, as demonstrated in Korea and the Pacific Rim. Design professional are complicit in the disparity of opportunities and health outcomes between communities, however, it doesn't have to be that way. P²