

## Public Interest Design Praxis: How Theory and Practice for the Public Good Demonstrate the Expanded Field of Contemporary Architecture

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“What is architecture?” “What do architects do?” These questions are not new in part because their answers change in response to shifting contexts that construct architectural praxis. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, change has become an ever-accelerating constant shaped by high-speed communications, global financial systems, and increased human mobility. This condition requires architecture to rethink the modern idea of space as neutral, mathematic, fixed and also the role of the architect as a shaper of space. The increase in public interest design<sup>1</sup> in recent years is one response within architecture that engages this condition, breaking out of what Awan et al. describe as a closed professional loop based on exclusive knowledge to engage a broader range of partners, processes, and products and reestablish the relevance of architecture in the contemporary world.<sup>2</sup>

Public interest design shifts architectural agency from service to clients and institutions to engagement with a broad range of partners, proactively addressing contemporary issues such as poverty, homelessness, and climate change. This requires a change in the relationship between architecture and the public from one of hierarchy to one of partnership. Design in this framework is not about delivering professional knowledge or products to a passive public but rather working with them to create change and agency. This type of work draws methods from a wide range of disciplines including philosophy, sociology, activism, and contemporary art. While architecture has always drawn from a wide range of other disciplines, in the area of public interest design it fuses theories of spatial production, the everyday, and relational tactics with practices of activism, participation, and material production to achieve goals of equity and social justice in the built environment. This fusion produces a true praxis, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “(c)onscious willed action, *esp.* ... that through which theory or philosophy is transformed into practical social activity; the synthesis of theory and practice seen as a basis for or condition of political and economic change.”<sup>3</sup>

While some of the theories and practices presented here are not new to architectural discourse, the re-emergence of public interest design during the past twenty years represents a significant expansion of the territory of architecture not only in terms of project and client types but also in terms of the structure of practice and the role of the architect. The praxis of public-interest design provides a framework for a relevant twenty-first century “architectural project” by realizing its potential as an agent of change. Examples presented here from a range of practices as well as the pedagogical approach of the [studio name] at [university name] demonstrate how this agency comes from seeing space, including architecture, as a social product that can be changed and produced by a wide range of agents. Architecture as a change agent thus acknowledges its political role and connects it to activism. By involving the underserved and unacknowledged it expands its field of knowledge through participation. Finally, the materiality of architecture and

architectural representation create vehicles for agency that work with community partners to produce new spaces of change.

## **Public Interest Design Praxis: Theories**

Theoretical ideas that connect space to empowerment are at the core of public interest design praxis. While many of these ideas intertwine and overlap, three key principles emerge: the social production of space, the everyday, and the relational. These theories borrow from philosophy, art theory, psychology, and sociology as well as other disciplines. When combined with public interest design practices, they generate an architectural praxis for advancing equity and social justice through the built environment.

### ***The Social Production Of Space***

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau contrasts the objective aerial view of the city, the view held by professional voyeurs like architects, with the view of “the ordinary practitioners of the city” at the street level who move from space to space, creating links and paths without knowing their relationship to the abstract whole.<sup>4</sup> The “concept city” is rationally organized, outside of time, and universal, reflecting the objective methods of Modernism and traditional contemporary practice. This city is held together, however, by the paths of those who walk on the ground, the *Wandersmänner*, whose experiences lie outside the rational order viewed from above.<sup>5</sup>

For de Certeau, the city created by governments, architects, and planners – the “concept city” – and the city created by ordinary people are distinct but coexistent to create an intertwined text that is readable through concept and metaphorical through practice.<sup>6</sup> The combined city is a product of social practices and relationships that include the hierarchical and top-down as well as the grassroots and bottom-up. These relationships also include what Henri Lefebvre calls “the social relations of reproduction” – family, friendships, identity, place – and “the relations of production” – employment, businesses, government, money – resulting in a social space produced by the mechanisms that structure public and private lives.<sup>7</sup>

Lefebvre summarizes this condition with the phrase “(Social) space is a (social) product.”<sup>8</sup> For Lefebvre, space is a product of three interrelated types of spatial production. “Spatial practice” or “perceived space” is similar to the space produced by de Certeau’s *Wandersmänner*, the movements of everyday people going to work, going shopping, going home. “Representations of space” or “conceived spaces” are “the dominant space in any society” and are connected to the “concept city;” they are the mechanisms of order that include codes, plans, laws, and drawings that represent a rationally organized reality. This space also contains many methods of architectural representation connected to rational traditions of Euclidean and perspective space.<sup>9</sup> Finally, “representational spaces” or “lived spaces” are where individual practices connect to larger social systems such as religion, ethnicity, and nationality, linking individual people through multi-faceted social networks. These “lived” spaces create identity and counterbalance the individuality of spatial practice, given inhabitants potential collective as well as individual power in the production of space.<sup>10</sup>

Space as socially produced rather than neutral means that it is malleable and its character can be changed by changing how we make spatial decisions. In *The Right to the City*, Lefebvre describes how decision-making needs to be restructured through “a political programme of urban reform not defined by the framework and the possibilities of prevailing society or subjugated to a ‘realism’, although based on the study of realities.”<sup>11</sup> This is not a restructuring to create more representative democracy, but rather an adding in of the mechanisms of the everyday in deciding how space is configured by not only enfranchised citizens but by “the whole of society and firstly of all those who *inhabit*.”<sup>12</sup> It “reorients decision-making away from the state and toward the production of urban space”<sup>13</sup> by valuing spatial practice and lived space alongside conceived space.

For public-interest design, the social production of space is a theoretical framework that points to methods of practice that move design beyond rational problem-solving to include the habits and practices of ordinary people as well as the systems that give their lives meaning and identity. These theories provide a framework for architecture to effectively address contemporary issues such as poverty, homelessness, and global warming by focusing on the social systems that created these conditions, and providing alternatives connected to existing social practices. This approach creates effective ways for designers to use their knowledge of the representation of space in combination with the spatial practices of ordinary people and their knowledge of representational space. As de Certeau puts it, “(T)o plan a city is both to *think the very plurality* of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural *effective*; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Everyday***

The importance of the everyday in constructing the theory of public-interest design practice lies in the abilities of normal, ordinary practices to move around and within the structures created by formal social power. De Certeau talks about the rhetoric of walking as something that “manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them).”<sup>15</sup> The everyday is thus not in opposition to the formal but in addition to it. This inclusion requires a reconsideration of the idea of “public space” as something created by practice that goes beyond the formal “public” spaces of the concept city.

As Margaret Crawford explains in *Everyday Urbanism*, the idea of public space based on the symbolic agora of Athens rests on a concept of “unity and equality as ideal conditions.” This is a limited and exclusive idea of participation, however, that removes conflict by excluding non-citizens like women and slaves.<sup>16</sup> This symbolic idea of public space therefore rests on an assumption of universality that is not universal and this precludes the diversity of lifestyles, beliefs, cultures, and daily practices of human beings. It also ignores the opportunities created by contestation over public space to encompass the everyday practices of a diversity of participants.

In discussing the types of spaces in which a broader definition of public occurs, Crawford quotes Lefebvre in defining everyday space as “the connective tissue that binds daily lives together, amorphous and so persuasive that it is difficult even to perceive.”<sup>17</sup> This space is ambiguous and shifting as it relies on fluctuating activities for its configuration, generating new social meanings

for previously defined spaces. Crawford demonstrates this with her example of houses in East Los Angeles where distinctions between house/street, private/public, women/men, family/business are blurred and reconfigured by placing unofficial commercial businesses in yards and garages, mixing the traditionally private space of the house with the public space of work through practices born out of financial necessity. While in the past the fenced yard created a clear distinction between the space of the house and the space of the street, these practices transform it into a zone of connection and overlap.<sup>18</sup>

Practices of everyday space demonstrate what Purcell describes as Lefebvre's "second aspect of the right to the city, the right to appropriation."<sup>19</sup> This involves not only the right to occupy space but also the right to produce it. Lefebvre asks "Why not oppose ephemeral cities to the eternal city, and movable centrality to stable centres?" as if he is envisioning the shifting, ambiguous spatial occupations of Crawford's garage sales.<sup>20</sup> He furthermore goes on to say that spatial appropriation is not only about recreating the spatial and/or temporal structure of the city but should also "include the way of living in the city and the development of the urban on this basis."<sup>21</sup>

The everyday that emerges from the lives of those struggling with scarcity, conflict, and disadvantage is particularly relevant because they engage the problems of inequity, disaster, and destruction created by the global polarization of power and abundance. They offer a rich source of knowledge and experience that even the wealthy may someday need in dealing with the effects of global warming, political revolution, economic collapse, and mass migration. Valuing the complexity of reality and the practices of ordinary people who create this complexity is a cornerstone of public interest design as these practices offer wisdom and insight into how to deal with these complex issues.

### ***The Relational***

While buildings have traditionally been considered the primary product of architecture, all buildings exist within and also shape larger social and spatial contexts. Acknowledging this relational condition and building upon it to extend the scope of architecture's production allows architecture to assume a catalytic role in realizing change, going beyond its traditional role as a static embodiment of existing power structures, what David Harvey calls the "material physical infrastructure for production, circulation, exchange, and consumption."<sup>22</sup> This represents not only a different scope for architectural practice but also a different approach to the theoretical structure of architecture's relationship to society.

In his essay "Pre-Form and Post-Form Design Activism," Bryan Bell describes this relational idea of architecture as extending the creation of built form to include pre-design analysis and engagement with communities, the development of designed form in partnership with local people, and the continued analysis of project success on multiple levels to feed back into subsequent work, thus creating a continuum of engagement with not only the built environment but also the people who occupy and shape it. While typical designers "come late to a project and leave early" and their primary role consists of creating form in response to a problem already defined by a client, Bell's "design activists" and "community designers" seek situations in which they can "help to define problems and locate opportunities where design has the potential to



change the lives of individual people and communities," thus expanding the design role to include identifying and articulating problems as well as solving them.<sup>23</sup>

This reconfigures the relationship between the architect and the public and redefines how their respective tools are used in the production of space. To participate effectively in the social production of space, architects must recognize that this production is what Awan et al. describe as "a shared enterprise" that "explicitly acknowledges the contribution of others, and with this dismisses the notion of expert authorship that the professions still cling to."<sup>24</sup> This shifts the relationship of the architect to the public from one of expertise, in which the architect provides knowledge as a service to a passive public, to one of partnership, in which both parties share knowledge to enhance each other's abilities.

This also reconfigures the role of representational tools as mechanisms of Lefebvre's "conceived space." While public interest designers continue to use measurement and geometry to create drawings, they no longer equate this with neutrality but instead acknowledge the specific social constructions of these tools, allowing "every line on an architectural drawing (to) be sensed as the anticipation of a future social relationship, and not merely as a harbinger of aesthetics or as an instruction to a contractor."<sup>25</sup> The architect becomes a moving player, shuttling between the existing power structure on the one hand and the marginal and disempowered on the other, creating new relationships out of existing oppositions.

*The Blue House* by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk illustrates how artistic spatial production by "experts" like artists and architects can shift from the production of things with which people passively interact to the production of conditions that create social relations, resulting in "the collective work of art (as) an accumulation of actors and actions, uniting diverse modes of participation, just as it is formed and informed by many individuals, members, residents and agencies."<sup>26</sup> Van Heeswijk created the context for expanding spatial production by negotiating with the City of Amsterdam and developers to occupy one building in the intensively planned Iburg project for several years. Artists, architects, thinkers, writers, and scholars lived and worked in the building, connecting with local residents and the public to create installations, events, small businesses, and casual encounters, ultimately creating "a spot that cannot be regulated within a living environment planned down to the last millimeter, a place for exchange and dialogue."<sup>27</sup>

Van Heeswijk's coordinating role represents a different kind of role for artists that can also inform architecture. In the traditional relationship between artist and public, the artist produces the work of art that is then viewed by the public. The production of the piece takes place within the artist's studio and the experience of the piece is one of passive observation by the viewer. This is similar to the production of architectural designs within an office and with which the public interact only after construction is complete. Art like Van Heeswijk's breaks down "perceived barriers between the viewer and the artwork" by complicating how we understand "where the productive moment of signification action – in a semiotic sense – takes place within an artwork or its structure."<sup>28</sup> The artist is no longer the individual creative genius but rather an engaged facilitator of activities. Through her negotiations with the City of Amsterdam, her invitations to participating artists, and the opportunity created by the space, she produces a spatial condition that facilitates an open-ended production of space by many people. Artists and

architects who work in this way move from a distanced expert or creative genius relationship to the public to a position of engaged partnership, shifting the structure of this relationship from a rigid hierarchy to a flexible network.

### **Public-Interest Design Praxis: Practices**

While theories frame action, praxis also requires practices that transform theories into realities. These practices allow theories to be observed, tested, and revised to frame subsequent actions. While its final form is not always a finite construction, public interest design praxis requires implementation as it often relies on improvisation and change for its realization rather than a priori determination. Philosophers like Henri Lefebvre do not provide guidelines for the implementation of their ideas,<sup>29</sup> but public interest design has established a vocabulary of practices that demonstrate theories of the social production of space, the everyday, and the relational. These provide foundations for future practices and pedagogies in public interest design as well as points of departure for new practices.

### ***Activism (change)***

In their introduction to *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, Susan Rogers and José Gámez state, “Powerful voices are emerging to call for an architecture of change, an architecture that matters to everyone, and these voices are being nurtured and sustained by the activist practices of designers and citizens working close to the ground.”<sup>30</sup> Architecture is a strong tool for activism because of its engagement of ideas through materials, its praxis. It takes abstract ideas about equity, inclusion, and democracy and translates them into experience through place and materials, producing new spaces that embody change. Change is critical to the idea of activism, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as, “The policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; *spec.* the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political change.”<sup>31</sup>

Activist practices within contemporary public interest design reconfigure the production of space through the everyday and the relational via a wide variety of tactics. The temporary, tactical, mobile, and informal in particular describe “an architecture that moves the field beyond the design of buildings and toward the design of new processes of engagement with the political forces that shape theories, practices, academies, policies, and communities.”<sup>32</sup> This type of work uses time as an asset to create changing conditions that call attention to issues in the existing spatial environment as well as potential alternatives. The work is not there, then it is there, then it is not there, creating a clear contrast between the status quo and another potential reality. Raqs Media Collective describes this contrast as a “time-out” from the “game” of spatial production in which “the contours of a new game can be discovered when the rules are in suspension – neither conformed to, nor yet concretely reinvented.”<sup>33</sup>

This type of activist practice is related to the protests and conceptual performances of the mid-twentieth century, reflecting civil disobedience tactics that make a statement by positioning the small and disempowered against the large, institutional, and empowered. It differs from past practices, however, that typically called for a complete transformation of society via revolution. Today, transformation takes place predominantly at the small local scale using mobility,

adaptability, and diversification to intervene in the dominant society.<sup>34</sup> Technology can transfer such small actions across time and space, as witnessed by the spread of PARK(ing) Day, an installation originally created in 2005 in San Francisco by the collective Rebar that has spread via the internet and social media to 975 different installations in 35 countries in 2011.<sup>35</sup>

Described on its website, “PARK(ing) Day is an annual worldwide event where artists, designers and citizens transform metered parking spots into temporary public parks.”<sup>36</sup> It began as “a tactic at once radical but superficially unthreatening to the system of spatial commodification it critiqued”<sup>37</sup> – paying for a parking space through a meter. The activist change occurred, however, through the interpretation of this act as the “renting” of the parking space for any activity, not just vehicle storage. The group installed a lawn, a shade tree, and a bench – elements typically associated with a park – allowing passersby to use the space as they liked.

The activism of this project lies not only in its physical presentation of an alternative use for an individual parking space but also in its creation of a new type of urban space through the global replication of tactics.<sup>38</sup> Rebar thus not only produced the space of a specific parking space in San Francisco in October, 2005 but they also generated a cascade of new relationships both with and between other designers and other cities by creating mechanisms whereby their tactic could proliferate.

Students in the spring 2013 [studio name] at [university name] employed similar tactics in creating the one-day event Pop Up! Time Check, designed to envision a new reality for a neighborhood that had lost half of its built infrastructure, half of its population, and nearly all of its commercial services following flooding in 2008 (Figure 1). After meeting with neighborhood residents and observing spatial practices in the neighborhood, students chose the intersection of K Avenue and Ellis Boulevard as the center for the event. One of the primary pre-flood commercial nodes in the largely residential neighborhood, this intersection was also the site of several important assets identified by residents including the now-empty A&W Drive-in Restaurant that had been a staple of neighborhood social life since the 1950s.



*Figure 1. Drawings showing built infrastructure in the Time Check neighborhood before and after the 2008 flood as well as the location of the Pop Up! Time Check event and its connections to important existing infrastructure. Source: Analytical figure-ground drawings by students Melissa Goodwin, Amanda Havel, and composite drawing by research assistant Jasmine Singh.*

The activism of the event contested the existing perception of the neighborhood as empty and abandoned. Intended as the future site of a proposed levee and greenway along the river, the now-open land was in limbo since funding had not been secured for levee construction. While other neighborhoods had rebounded through private development assisted by public funding, this area was considered too risky for private investment and public monies were therefore also not available as the city relied entirely on public/private funding mechanisms.

Students worked in small teams and partnered with local organizations to create temporary installations for the Pop Up! Time Check event held on April 13, 2013. In addition to organizing local musicians and food vendors, the students' installations re-presented this key intersection as a lively public space with activities for people of all ages and opportunities for many types of interactions. Guided by principles from precedents including PARK(ing) Day, The Pop-Up City, and the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, fifteen students in architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, and community and regional planning created an event that transformed an empty intersection into a bustling hub of activity involving nearly two hundred local residents as well as participants from businesses, schools, non-profits, and the city council. Students also created social media links through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, extending the space of the event beyond its physical site and date.

The Pop Up! Coffee Shop project, created by Zach Sunderland and Collin Delano, demonstrates how the temporary creation of an alternative reality can act as a starting point for more permanent transformation. Interested in better understanding how existing empty buildings could be reinvigorated, Zach and Collin developed a relationship with Don and Dave, two local retirees

who had purchased the former Chirps Autobody building at the northwest corner of the K and Ellis intersection. While they intended to use the back part of the building to work on old cars, Don and Dave hoped to rent out the front space but were uncertain about what kind of business would make the best tenant. After meeting with local residents, it became clear to the students that food-related businesses were much-desired and a local coffee shop – not a chain! – was very much in demand. Zach and Collin decided to stage their pop up in the space outside the building for visibility and also to demonstrate to Don and Dave that they could use the exterior as well as the interior of their building to generate street life (Figure 2). They also teamed with a local wholesale coffee roaster who supplied their beans and they created furniture and a coffee bar using only recycled materials. During the event, they were always crowded and many conversations started as neighbors waited for their individually steeped coffees. Ideas about connections with potential tenants and suppliers circulated frequently and Don and Dave finished the day with a list of contacts for potential future tenants.



*Figure 2. The Pop Up Coffee Shop in front of the Chirps building during the Pop Up! Time Check event. Source: Author and Zach Sunderland.*

While a project like the Pop Up Coffee Shop does not overtly protest an existing condition or policy, it uses techniques specific to design activism to create what Alastair Fuad-Luke calls “a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change.”<sup>39</sup> It created an alternative reality for a period of time and, by involving the public as well as a range of partners in this reality, created belief in the potential of that counter-narrative and momentum to bring it to fruition.

### ***Participation (decision-making)***

In addition to advocating for or demonstrating change, public interest designers also work with community partners who are very different from fee-based clients and from architects themselves.

The National Endowment for the Arts' "Design and Social Impact" report<sup>40</sup> identifies cultural bias as one of the potential hazards of this type of work as designers can lack understanding of local culture and values as a result of spatial, class, and racial differences. Without this understanding, designers may not only impose outside ideas on communities but prevent them from being active participants in creating their futures, maintaining or even worsening the balance of power. According to sociologist Robert Gutman, every society has two kinds of culture, material and nonmaterial. Material culture is physical, touchable, measurable, visible; our houses, cars, clothing are elements of material culture. Nonmaterial culture impacts us but lacks physical properties; it consists of "values, beliefs, norms, traditions" and defines how material culture is used and valued.<sup>41</sup>

Typical professional practices rely on one-way communication in which architects provide information to communities, often using tools that are difficult for lay people to understand. A neighborhood meeting in which architects present a fully developed design rendered to appear complete exemplifies this and provides minimal opportunity for residents to question or shape what will be built. Asset-based design is a method developed in multiple social science disciplines that uses the "capacities, skills, and assets of lower income people and their neighborhoods" as foundations for action.<sup>42</sup> This method builds communities from the inside out, developing the capacity of participants by engaging them as partners rather than recipients in the process of reinventing their community. As partners in the process of developing and realizing the project, community members develop a sense of ownership as they see their decisions in physical form. At the same time, designers benefit from the local knowledge and insights that only local residents can provide.

This kind of partnership is a critical component of successful public interest design. If the architect acts as only an advocate for the ideas of the community, they do not benefit from her ability to bring in new ideas and synthesize diverse types of knowledge. While some older public interest practices promote a purely advocacy role for designers with communities as the sole decision-makers, more recent practices demonstrate that partnership is in fact the most productive designer-community relationship because it benefits from both professional and local knowledge.

The work of Teddy Cruz with non-profit Casa Familiar in San Ysidro, California, for example, demonstrates the critical importance of both parties in realizing a new vision. In his Stirling Lecture on the City, Cruz describes "information and communication itself" as the first steps in transforming a community into "an experimental think tank" for developing a tactical zoning policy to accommodate the needs of the contemporary population. The resulting Affordable Housing Overlay Zone (AHOZ) is a micro-zoning policy that uses existing non-conforming practices within the community as starting points. For example, many households had transformed existing living spaces into small businesses or built additions in setbacks to accommodate large multi-generational families.<sup>43</sup> While both the government and residents saw these practices as "illegal," Cruz identified their potential as design tactics and visually documented them to create official records. He could not have done this, however, without the assistance of Casa Familiar, a local organization with local clients who knew the concerns of the residents as well as the physical geography of the neighborhood. This partnership was thus more effective in realizing change than either party would have been on its own and the existing non-conforming practices in the neighborhood were transformed from illegal activities to "a tactical



new zoning policy... that is initiated from within the community and not from the planners' table, mediated by the non-profit and an urban legislature that can accommodate and support a more inclusive and complex micro-urbanism.”<sup>44</sup>

The Pop-Up! Time Check project used a range of participatory methods, introducing students to the multiple levels on which architecture can become an empowering process through participation. Early in the semester, students conducted interviews and observed spatial practices to identify existing spatial and social assets (Figure 3). Because the neighborhood had been so altered by the recent flood, assets were defined as not only existing people and places of value but also places and events from the past. An important goal of this process was to determine how a new future could be linked to the past rather than recreating a nostalgic image of the past. This furthermore helped new ideas about the neighborhood feel like they were still part of the place rather than impositions from the outside. Two significant questions used for the interviews were “How do you define your neighborhood?” and “What is your favorite neighborhood memory?”



*Figure 3. Students meeting with local business owners (left) and interviewing neighborhood residents (right). Source: Author.*

The intersection of K Avenue and Ellis Boulevard, the A&W Restaurant located at this intersection, and the importance of children and young people came up repeatedly in all discussions. This gave the students a sense of how the physical infrastructure of streets and zoning related to the social infrastructure of the neighborhood and confirmed the area's history as a multi-generational working class neighborhood as well as a more recent shift toward a younger, more diverse population in terms of race and class.

To help with the realization of their pop up projects, student teams identified and partnered with local organizations. Sarah Bruketta and Han Kwon were interested in exploring how art and children could renew residents' sense of ownership for their changed neighborhood. While they initially studied flat mural art traditions, their project Draw On Time Check eventually became a three-dimensional scaffold to surround observers with images created by local children. After unsuccessfully trying to engage several youth arts organizations in other parts of the city, the students partnered with the art teacher at the local Harrison Elementary School to help involve local children in the project and acquire much-needed drawing supplies for the school. The students created a folding paper template that was distributed by the art teacher to several classes of students along with donated drawing materials. The students drew on the paper in response to the question, “What do you like about your neighborhood?” and the drawings were folded into

“lanterns” to hang on the scaffold. During the event, additional templates were available at a drawing table where anyone could create and hang their own drawings.

The project was successful in ways that were unexpected by the students. While much of their time was concentrated around the detailing and construction of the wooden scaffold, the multiple ways in which it engaged the children and adults of the community was the true impact (Figure 4). They learned that the children from the art classes had been reminding their parents every day how important it was to go and see their art on the day of the event. At the installation, children pointed out their works to each other and to their parents, encouraging siblings and parents to create their own lanterns while posing proudly for photos. For the design students, their usual sense of professional detachment was completely erased. As one of the students wrote in a post-event reflection, “This reaction to our Pop Up was the best we could have ever hoped for because the focus was not so much about us as it was about the children. The project made the young kids feel proud of themselves and, in turn, gave their parents something to be proud of as well – by coming out on Saturday, they became a community again.”



*Figure 4. Images of the Draw On Time Check installation. Source: Author, Sarah Bruketta, Han Kwon.*

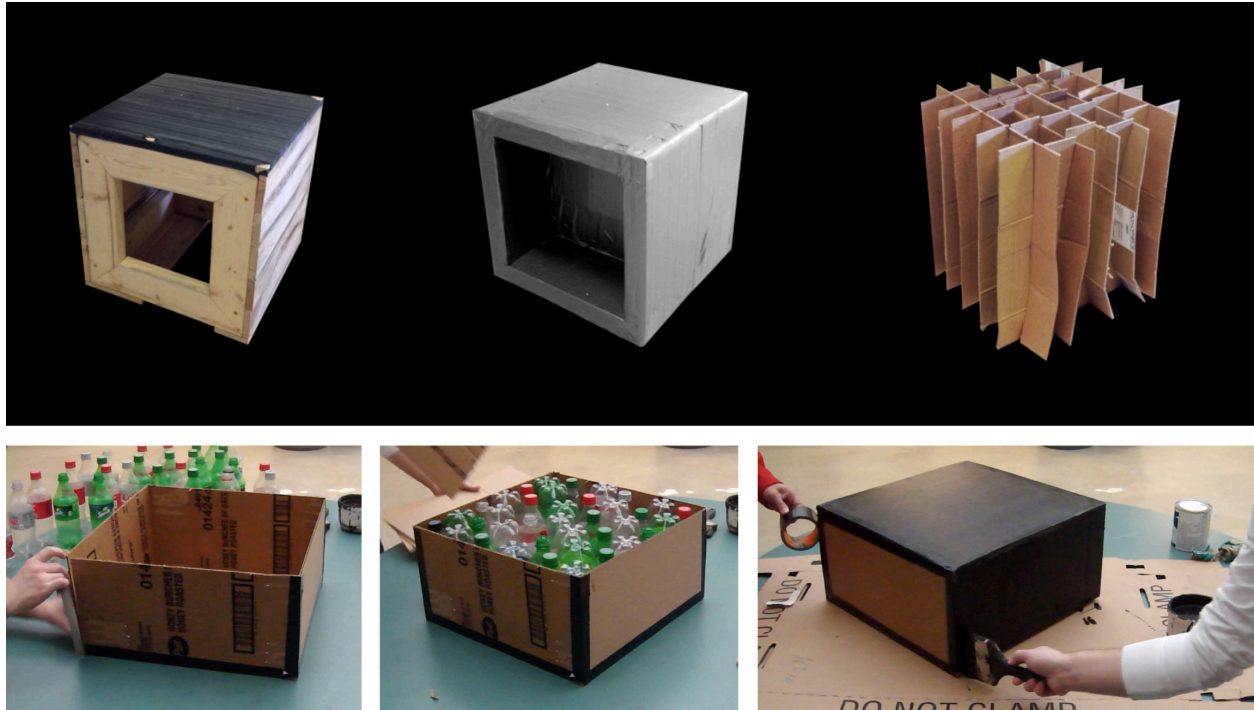


### ***Material Agency (appropriation)***

In his essay “Infrastructural Urbanism,” Stan Allen positions architecture as a discipline involved not only with semiotics and meaning or even “power and politics” but as a discipline that engages these areas through its “powerful instrumentality – its capacity not only to critique, but also to actually transform reality” by working “simultaneously with abstract images and material realities, in complex interplay. It is a *material* practice.”<sup>45</sup> The materiality of architecture is both a traditional and progressive component of public interest design praxis that realizes its theoretical aspirations. The architect acts as an agent “who effects change through the *empowerment* of others, allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as a result of reconfigured social space,”<sup>46</sup> giving them agency in their own contexts. This realizes Lefebvre’s idea of the appropriation of space as an essential component of the right to the city as participants use their own everyday practices to produce space.

PARK(ing) Day is an example of this kind of material tactic in which the designers construct a set of principles or guidelines that are realized by multiple actors in ways more diverse than the designers could envision. The guidelines alone, however, would mean nothing without the material manifestations because it is through the rendering of the principles into materiality that the makers and users of each installation gain the agency to produce space. Similarly, Cruz’ AHOZ project is a strategic system based on the material practices of its community partners. The system in turn facilitates these practices, removing their illicit status and rendering them legitimate.

The pop up project Pluripotent Modularity was initially conceived by Justin Massey and Liz Lee as a system for using recycled materials to create street furniture. While their goal was to enhance the street life in the Time Check neighborhood, they struggled with the static nature of their investigations. Their initial precedent studies were restricted to street furniture designs whose level of interactivity was typically limited to painting benches and planters. Frustrated, they switched to material investigations using a variety of found materials to create a repetitive shape that could be tested for strengths and weaknesses (Figure 5). The cube, however, had no orientation and therefore did not take advantage of the directional properties of the plastic soda bottles that proved to be one of the sturdiest and most readily available materials. With a flatter module, they then had to explore joints, eventually arriving at a series of interlocking shapes that could be configured into a flat life-size game board as well as a range of other configurations. The students worked with the gym teacher at Harrison Elementary School to test the components for durability in gym classes, also raising students’ awareness of and excitement about the Pop Up! Time Check event.



*Figure 5. Material explorations for modular components in Pluripotent Modularity pop up project.*  
*Source: Justin Massey and Liz Lee.*

On the day of the event (Figure 6), Justin and Liz initially arranged their components as a game board that was disassembled fairly quickly into an ever-changing series of configurations. While the younger children took the initiative, creating giant stacks of blocks, some of the older children eventually figured out that various pieces interlocked with each other, enabling them to create fort-like enclosures. As the gym teacher pointed out, the children had to cooperate with each other to work effectively with the modules, helping them not only have fun physical play but also build important social skills at the same time. Parents also put benches together where they could sit and watch their children play, interacting with neighbors and strangers through both the creation of the benches and the conversations that followed. As one of the students observed, “this unconventional event allowed (residents) to utilize space in a way they never had before, and they really took complete ownership of it.” The students also experienced a shift in their understanding of the role of material in design from something that renders a design permanent and fixed to something that enables appropriation and adaptability.



*Figure 6. People initially played with the modular components arranged as a game board (left) but later reconfigured them into a wide array of forts, table, and benches that generated interactive cooperation. Source: Author, Justin Massey.*

## Conclusion

Public interest design creates an expanded field of architectural praxis by synthesizing theoretical ideas about the social production of space, the everyday, and the relational with the practices of activism, participation, and material agency. Public interest design practitioners like Rebar, Jeanne van Heeswijk, and Teddy Cruz demonstrate the effectiveness of these tactics in opening up access to design and facilitating its power as an agent of change. Pedagogical practices like the Pop Up! Time Check event expose students to the ideas and methods of public interest design praxis and help them experience systems, events, and interactions as legitimate architectural products. These ideas and practices come from an array of disciplines both within and outside of architecture and their synthesis defines and enables an architecture that can proactively engage the relevant issues of our time. The expansion of the architectural territory by public interest design does not eliminate the questions “What is architecture?” and “What do architects do?” but rather allows them to be fluidly open-ended and resistant to definition.

## Figures

Figure 1. Drawings showing built infrastructure in the Time Check neighborhood before and after the 2008 flood as well as the location of the Pop Up! Time Check event and its connections to important existing infrastructure. Source: Analytical figure-ground drawings by students Melissa Goodwin, Amanda Havel, and composite drawing by research assistant Jasmine Singh.

Figure 2. The Pop Up Coffee Shop in front of the Chirps building during the Pop Up! Time Check event. Source: Author and Zach Sunderland.

Figure 3. Students meeting with local business owners (left) and interviewing neighborhood residents (right). Source: Author.

Figure 4. Images of the Draw On Time Check installation. Source: Author, Sarah Bruketta, Han Kwon.

Figure 5. Material explorations for modular components in Pluripotent Modularity pop up project.

Source: Justin Massey and Liz Lee.

Figure 6. People initially played with the modular components arranged as a game board (left) but later reconfigured them into a wide array of forts, table, and benches that generated interactive cooperation. Source: Author, Justin Massey.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a listing and definitions of various terms for socially oriented design, see “Glossary,” Public Interest Design, accessed July 28, 2013, <http://www.publicinterestdesign.org/glossary/>.

<sup>2</sup> Nishat Awan, Tatjana Schneider, Jeremy Till, eds., *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2011), 43.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. praxis, accessed July 28, <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 92-93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-97.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 33 and 38-39.

<sup>11</sup> Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” 155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Purcell, “Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant,” *GeoJournal* (2002): 58, 101.

<sup>14</sup> de Certeau, 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Crawford, “Blurring the Boundaries: Public Space and Private Life” in *Everyday Urbanism*, ed. John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1999), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991) quoted in Margaret Crawford, “Blurring the Boundaries,” *Everyday Urbanism*, 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Crawford, 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Purcell, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” 155.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> David Harvey, “The Urban Process under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis” in *The Urbanization of Capital* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 13-14.

<sup>23</sup> Bryan Bell, “Pre-Form and Post-Form Design Activism” in *Architecture from the Outside In*, ed. Robert Gutman, Dana Cuff, and John Wriedt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010) 76-77.

<sup>24</sup> Awan et al., 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Paul O’Neill, “Three Stages in the Art of Participation – The Relational, Social, and Durational,” in *Neighbourhood Secrets: Art as Urban Processes*, ed. Jan Inge Reilstad (Oslo: Press Publishing, 2009), 340-341.

<sup>27</sup> “The Blue House,” Urban Matters, accessed July 31, 2013, <http://urban-matters.org/projectsbyindividuals/the-blue-house>.

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- <sup>28</sup> Liam Gillick and Maria Link, "Participation," in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 204.
- <sup>29</sup> See Purcell, 105-109.
- <sup>30</sup> José L. S. Gámez and Susan Rogers, "An Architecture of Change" in *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, ed. Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008), 19.
- <sup>41</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. activism, accessed July 28, <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.
- <sup>32</sup> Gamez and Rogers, 19.
- <sup>33</sup> Raqs Media Collective, "Light from a Distant Star: A Meditation on Art, Agency, and Politics" in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 256.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.
- <sup>35</sup> PARK(ING) DAY, accessed July 31, 2013, <http://parkingday.org>.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>37</sup> Blaine Merker, "Taking place: Rebar's absurd tactics in generous urbanism" in *Insurgent Public Space: Guerrilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities*, ed. Jeffrey Hou, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 46.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.
- <sup>39</sup> Fuad-Luke, 27.
- <sup>40</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Design and Social Impact: A Cross-Sectoral Agenda for Design Education, Research, and Practice" (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2013), 6.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert Gutman, "A Sociologist Looks at Housing" in *Architecture from the outside in: selected essays* by Robert Gutman (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2010), 215.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>43</sup> Cruz, "Border Postcards."
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Stan Allen, "Infrastructural Urbanism" in *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 50-51.
- <sup>46</sup> Awan et. al., 32.