



the Center for
Urban Pedagogy
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residential architect

november · december 2006

perspective

spread the word

architects have some explaining to do.

by damon rich

Oh, the people you meet when you're trying to get something built ...

Through our professional interaction with developers, contractors, city inspectors, engineers, and clients, we architects understand at a detailed level how buildings take shape out of a push-and-pull among sometimes brutal forces: not just physical forces like wind and weight, but also institutional forces such as community councils, banks, environmental regulators, and town superintendents.

At a time when many architects and students of architecture are looking for ways to boost the communal good through design, studying up on topics from green construction and emergency shelters to New Urbanism and participatory design, I'd like to suggest one more role for the profession: architect as explainer. Of course, the normal job description already requires lots of explanations to co-workers, suppliers, and clients. What I am proposing is a more public and open-ended role for designers, who possess an intimate knowledge of the decisions that form the built environment. Usually our job is to find solutions for our clients,

but we can also contribute by clearly and visually delineating problems for the public.

Such work finds inspiration in leaders such as Lawrence Veiller, an architect who worked at the end of the 19th century to explain New York City's housing crisis to the masses. After unsuccessfully lobbying city officials to improve housing conditions, he and his allies took their case to the public, most famously with a two-week exhibition in 1900 that contained architectural models and hundreds of photographs, maps, charts, and diagrams illustrating the problem. Visitors were shown not only the existing physical conditions in places like Manhattan's Lower East Side, but also the institutional forces that created those conditions. The exhibition included not just a single solution, but rather many proposed designs for low-cost housing. According to historian Richard Plunz, "a housing exhibition of such size and scope has not been seen since in New York



Courtesy Center for Urban Pedagogy

In 2001, the Center for Urban Pedagogy—the nonprofit organization founded by the author—put together an exhibit called *Building Codes: The Programmable City* at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York City. The show celebrated the 100th anniversary of New York's first building code.

City." Ultimately, Veiller's work led to the passage of our nation's first true building code—the Tenement House Act of 1901, which, among other things, required indoor toilets for apartment buildings.

information flow

At the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), we aspire to follow Veiller's approach by using tools of architecture that are often kept in the back room of a practice—site and program analyses, visual representations, models, cost estimates—and make them useful and accessible for pub-

lic discussions. As a nonprofit organization producing exhibitions, publications, Web sites, videos, and school curricula, our mission is to make educational projects about places and how they change.

Since Veiller's time, Americans have seen a profusion of opportunities for the public to engage in the design of our shared spaces. Just the hearings associated with a single environmental-impact review to widen a highway could tire the most civic-minded citizen. To the dismay of many architects, this increase in public partici-

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pation has failed to open up a dynamic architectural debate. More often, it has bolstered people's resistance to change in the form of NIMBY syndrome. Our work at CUP aims to overcome the fear of the new by giving people a realistic and provocative sense of the possible. Simply put, we hope to put the visionary power of architecture and design in the hands of the public.

For example, while doing a project about the state of public housing, we noticed that the word "subsidy" gets thrown around a lot, usually with a pejorative connotation. It implies a relationship of dependency bordering on impropriety. To hear of a highly subsidized project is to hear of a project that stinks of corruption, government favor, or—depending on who you talk to—soft-headed liberalism. After one talks with a few policy specialists, the picture becomes more complex. In the United States, all sorts of construction projects are supported directly by public money, and if you include "incentives," such as tax deductions, the line between the private and the "subsidized" landscape blurs.

To show this complex relationship between the public and private, we built a large interactive model.

The model illustrates 14 types of subsidy programs supporting a wide range of housing types. Decision makers—including government agencies, developers, and banks—are connected to the different housing types by animated lights showing the flows of money, authority, and noncash assets that result in development.

force for change

The goal of our model is not to convince people to end subsidies, but instead, to see the reality of our built environment beyond the simple dichotomy of public and private. Hopefully, this vision of the subsidized landscape may help us think about how a finite sum of public dollars should be used to facilitate the construction of our ideal living environments.

After all, the ideal of homeownership—made possible only through government loans and the construction of a state-devised mortgage finance system—has become a key aspect of American life. And yet, it is public housing that continues to symbolize government intervention, while highways and suburbs have been taken for granted as nearly natural occurrences. Much like the disparate fates of Social Security and "welfare," housing subsidies have



Photos and model: Courtesy Center for Urban Pedagogy
The Subsidized Landscape, a 2003 exhibit created by CUP, used an interactive model (above and top) to demonstrate how governments supply funding for various housing types, from historic structures to single-family houses to low-income apartment buildings.

developed along separate and unequal tracks, highly segregated by income and race. One track leads to homeownership for well-off whites, the other to substandard rental housing for poor blacks; one is normalized, the other, stigmatized.

CUP hopes to develop further technologies for visualizing the subsidized landscape. We're currently developing a set of visual aids for community development that a variety of organizations can use to help educate and motivate their constituencies, improve public charrettes, and more. We're also producing a television series called "Public Housing Television" to educate residents

and others about how public housing works. When residents have a clear understanding of the government's role in shaping their environment, they can take a more active role in shaping their government. Even if we are not proposing new buildings, architects can still play a vital role in educating the public about places and how they work. **ra**

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