A Study of Green Design and Community Activists: Designing My Future

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

"Ninety-five percent of the world's designers focus all their effort on developing products and services exclusively for the richest 10% of the world's customers." Why is this? Three incredibly inspiring activists and designers are challenging this notion. The analysis of the lives and work of Majora Carter, Grace Lee Boggs, Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope led to the development of new core beliefs and values about the design process. After examining the lives and works of three individual activists and one design group, I become closer to realizing what it takes to become a person of action and to use my design education for the greater good after my undergraduate studies are complete.

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I would also like to thank Mike for helping me through this process and encouraging me every second of the way.
Introduction to Thesis Work

What is the first thought that comes to mind when one thinks of architecture? Maybe one thinks of the Taj Mahal, the Guggenheim in New York, or the Barcelona Pavilion. High profile jobs are what architects have striven for since the beginning of time. These types of jobs put a firm’s name out there, ultimately gaining them relevance and a healthy revenue. The only people who typically receive design services are the people who can afford it. In fact, “Ninety-five percent of the world’s designers focus all their effort on developing products and services exclusively for the richest 10% of the world’s customers.” (“Eco”) This system does not make sense to me. The other 90% of the world has immense need for safe, sustainable, and affordable spaces in which to live and work. Unfortunately, this population is devastatingly underserved, typically because of the difficulty to turn any sort of profit and to make a living doing this kind of work. After examining the lives and works of three individual activists and one design group, I hope to come closer to realizing what it requires to become a person of action and to use my design education for the greater good after my undergraduate studies are complete.

The education that I have received at Ball State University’s College of Architecture and Planning has made me very interested in sustainable and socially responsible design. All of my classes and studios present green design to us as something that is unquestionable. It is something that we should consider our responsibility as unspoken stewards of the environment. I wholeheartedly believe this as truth. I want to be as socially and environmentally
conscious as possible as a designer. As a reading and writing exercise before my final written thesis, I kept a blog. I wrote thirteen entries, each one focusing on one specific person, ideology, or design group whose work excited and inspired me. Through my blogging exercise, I was able to research and write about these inspiring people that I discovered and after each entry, I came closer and closer to realizing the steps I need to take to become as successful as the people that I wrote about. They have all sacrificed moneymaking potential in order to help individuals and whole communities benefit from good design. They are incredibly inspiring and creative people, using their education as power.

Majora Carter

Majora Carter is an environmental justice activist, born in the South Bronx on October 27th, 1966. She grew up wanting desperately to get away. She constantly witnessed her neighborhood slowly declining, as more and more buildings were abandoned, burned down, and completely neglected. Education became her escape. She received her Bachelor's degree in cinema studies and film production from Wesleyan University ("Majora"). However, it was not until she moved back with her parents to attend New York University for her Master's degree that she began to see her hometown in a different light. Carter started working on environmental projects from that point forward. She took on protests when she heard the mayor's plan to add to the waste management facilities in the South Bronx, causing 40% of New York City's municipal waste to be filtered directly into Carter's neighborhood ("Majora"). Because of her work, Majora Carter inspired others to take action and caused the city's plan to be averted.
According to Carter, "If power plants, waste handling, chemical plants and transport systems were located in wealthy areas as quickly and easily as in poor areas, we would have had a clean, green economy decades ago." ("Majora") Although she was already motivated to make a difference in her community, it was not until one specific incident occurred that she decided to make it her life's work.

One day, while Majora Carter was walking her dog, she came across a disused stretch of waterway in her community that was terribly polluted. This was the moment that stirred her to make a huge difference in her neighborhood by writing a $1.25 million dollar grant proposal for an 11-mile South Bronx Greenway. This greenway provides alternative transportation connections, recreational spaces, green enhancements, and job opportunities ("Majora"). Then, in 2001, she started Sustainable South Bronx, an organization that works to promote sustainable growth in the neighborhood. The Bronx Environmental Stewardship Program is a part of this operation and trains people who are unemployed in the neighborhood to become skilled in sustainable jobs such as green roof installation. This idea turns citizens into taxpayers, whereas before they were considered to be tax burdens. Carter hopes that she is eventually worked out of a job by building her project up to a point where they do not need her anymore ("Majora").

Majora Carter is moving because she had a vision and followed through with it, even though it was not her original plan. She had every intention of moving out of the South Bronx but she saw an opportunity to help her
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neighborhood and went above and beyond to make it happen. Typically people who attempt to make change in neighborhoods do not originate from the area, and more often than not, they fail. Majora Carter was able to make a positive change within her hometown because she knew the people in it, she lived within it herself, and she knew what its people needed. After researching Majora and her work, and after hearing her speak in person at Ball State, I have come to realize that designers might not always be the solution to a problem within a distressed community. Majora was not educated as a designer, and yet she knew exactly what her neighborhood needed and how to implement it. Architects can acquire large egos over time, thinking that they know what is right all of the time because they have a design background. Majora opened my mind to just how important it is to value each and every opinion given to me and to not discredit anything if it did not come from a design background.

Grace Lee Boggs

Grace Lee Boggs is another inspiring advocate that has an incredibly impressive track record. Boggs is an activist and a philosopher who was born in Rhode Island in 1915 to Chinese immigrant parents ("Biography"). She graduated with her Bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Barnard College in 1935 and earned her PhD from Bryn Mawr College. After graduating, she moved to Chicago to work in the University of Chicago’s philosophy library. Her background growing up around Chinese immigrants and her knowledge of philosophy undoubtedly first piqued her interest in community activism, but the moment that pushed her toward a lifetime commitment to it was when she joined
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a group of students in the South Side Tenant’s Organization. She fought for the right for everyone to live in a healthy and save environment. From then on out, she was committed to working for the rights of others (“Biography”).

Boggs made her next cause African American civil rights. She moved to New York and worked there for a time until she met her future husband James Boggs, an autoworker from Detroit. She moved to Detroit in 1953 and together, she and her husband became a huge influence on both local and national politics (Biography). They were both heavily involved in the black power movement in the 1960s and crossed paths with Malcolm X multiple times. (DAAHP) She respected him greatly and considered him to be what a term which she coined known as an “organic intellectual.” (“I Remember”)

This concept of organic intellectualism drives Boggs’ ideals. She believes that in order to truly become an intellectual, one must also be in a perpetual state of change (“The Audacity”). She also credits herself and her husband as organic intellectuals. Of her husband, she states that, “He kept abreast of the changes taking place in his reality and recognized that these changes were creating new contradictions demanding that we think anew. In other words, he thought dialectically, historically.” (“The Audacity”) This, I believe is the reason that she has been involved in so many causes throughout her life, instead of simply sticking to one particular cause, remaining stagnant. She recognizes that just as the world is constantly evolving, our minds should be doing the same. So many philosophers, activists, and politicians remain stagnant in their ways and soon

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lose relevance in the world. Boggs is a testament to relevancy as a 96-year-old woman still actively involved in community activism within Detroit.

Although Boggs is not a designer, I nonetheless find her work and philosophies incredibly relevant to the architectural field. Her book entitled, “The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty First Century” is especially interesting for me as I set out to find my way in the world after graduation. It is from people such as Grace Lee Boggs, Majora Carter, and everyone I am to discuss later that have given me many ideas and inspirations regarding the methods to which I may incorporate sustainability and socially responsible thinking into design. Everyone in every vocation could benefit from Boggs’ philosophy, especially designers. Architects are known for being stubborn, set in their ways and egotistical. However, I want to always remember to always ask new questions, to stay informed, and to continue to challenge what I think is the truth everyday, and I want to do this so that I might gain a small portion of the knowledge that Boggs has acquired over her long and fulfilled life.

Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope

Two people whose work I stumbled upon while in pursuit of one of my later blog entries follow below in this next analytic section. Gina Reichert, an architect, and Mitch Cope, an artist, are a husband and wife team that makes up the design group known as Design 99 (Patton). They have completed work so unique and so rousing that I could not help but hope that I might do something as interesting, creative, and fulfilling with my career as they have with theirs. The couple moved to Detroit and founded Design 99 in 2007. Their goal has been to
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re-imagine art and architectural practice (Patton). They saw a need within the community for cheap design services and they went for it. Obviously, providing their architectural and artistic services at an unheard rate of just ninety-nine dollars per house call leaves them with little much of a profit, but they do it because they love it and they know that their neighbors, the traditionally underserved population of clients, are grateful for their help (Patton).

Aside from their cheap design work, Reichert and Cope have recently begun to revitalize their Detroit neighborhood by purchasing dilapidated properties and giving them not only artistic appeal, but highly functional purposes (Whyte). Their first project, a foreclosed home they purchased for a mere $1900 has become known as "Power House." Not only does it stand out as a landmark for the community through its bright and cheery color scheme, but it also stands apart from the power grid, running from power generated by its solar panels and its wind power generator (Whyte). It functions as, "a design laboratory, an installation space and guest house for visiting artists." (Patton) Since Power House's dedication, Reichert and Cope have purchased many other homes at a bargain price and continually add their artistic and practical flair to them. They have also become what some people consider artistic ambassadors for their community, encouraging other artists to either make their mark on their properties, or to purchase homes nearby so that they may become a part of the community and inspire others through art (Whyte).

Reichert and Cope wished to bring excitement and safety to a neighborhood where there once was depression, anxiety, and hopelessness.
They have proven that a true difference can be made through the power of design, art, recycling, and community building. They have revitalized an entire neighborhood, bringing in students from nearby Universities to contribute, as well as new community members and artists. A drab area is now transformed into a colorful, creative, and inspiring place that lifts the morale of all who enter. Many aspects of Reichert and Cope's work inspire me and bring excitement to my core as a future designer. Their creative reuse of materials, structures, trash, and art pieces for use in distressed areas is exactly the type of work that I eventually want to be a part of. Their work is some of the most creative and invigorating that I have seen dealing with the core values of green design and community activism.

Learning from People

When I set out to write these blog entries, I wanted to find answers. I wanted to know what it took to make a difference in distressed areas within urban environments, especially while utilizing green ideologies. In short, I was aiming to discover what it really takes to go from dreaming to doing. The aforementioned people are doing what many of us dream we could do. Why is it that so many of us never go past dreaming? Many factors can lead us to this explanation, including lack of sufficient financial compensation, getting caught up in the business of life, feeling content with our current socially expected career paths, and even simply never encountering an earth shattering event that causes activism to shoot to the top of our priority list. The one unifying trend I have found
among every activist that I have written about is that they each had one specific moment in their lives that caused them to dedicate their lives to helping others.

**What It Takes To Be An Activist**

An interesting trend that I have observed as a result of my research is that every activist that inspires me seemed to come across that “aha” moment when they were around my age; typically right when they were finishing up their college educations and beginning their careers. For Majora Carter, it was moving back home during her studies at NYU when she started seeing the South Bronx as a neighborhood with great potential. Soon after, she stumbled across that barren and decrepit stretch of waterway in her neighborhood that was filled with trash and pollution ("Majora"). This was her moment. She knew at that point in time that she was the one that needed to take action because if she did not step up, no one would. Her deeply rooted connection to her community that started to take hold again after she moved back home must have attributed to her immense need to take immediate action. Grace Lee Boggs had just received her PhD when she moved to Chicago for work in a philosophy library. Her life-changing turning point arrived with her first taste of activism. She got a feel for what community work was like when she decided to join the South Side Tenants Organization ("Biography"). After organizing, protesting, and making a difference in her community, she decided to dedicate her life to fighting for community rights. Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope decided to take action when they moved to their current neighborhood in Detroit. One day they realized that all of the houses around them were slowly being moved out of, foreclosed on, or burned to the
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ground (Patton). They then realized that they needed to do something to restore their community’s pride and sense of safety. Design 99 and Power House emerged from their efforts and they have since flourished.

The fact that all of the activists that I have studied starting making a difference at such a young age gives me hope for my future. As a young soon-to-be graduate, sometimes the thought of doing anything as ambitious as these people have done arouses a deep anxiety within me. I sometimes still see myself as someone who simply happens to be too young to really make a difference. However, after the research that I have done on these inspiring people, I realize that age has nothing to do with action. Using green ideologies to improve communities, or any other activist mission, comes to fruition only when a person becomes so passionate about a cause that they actually stop only discussing their ideas, but putting them into practice through deliberate and determined action.

It is clear now that if I want to make a difference such as Majora Carter, Grace Lee Boggs, and Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope have, I need to find what inspires me and take action. However, what inspires me today might not incite the same passion within me tomorrow. When I graduate, I must put myself in the company of people and organizations that support my goals, especially those of community activism in urban environments through green design. It is possible that I find a new passion while in pursuit of another, but it is essential that I strive for organic intellectualism, as Boggs would say. Being afraid of change will only stymie any growth that I may try to attain.
Blogging

My blogging exercise was incredibly valuable as a place for me to research all topics related to green ideologies within urban environments and to publish my opinions to a medium available for anyone to see. My hope when starting my blog was that I would receive frequent comments on every post and wide exposure. I was impressed with the amount of views that I received, over 160 page views of my thirteen total entries, and it reached people from countries as far away as Russia and Australia. Unfortunately, I did not receive the written feedback that I had hoped for. Although blogging did not seem to have the desired effect of public participation, it proved to be a very powerful writing and research exercise by which I was able to discover the people who have succeeded in implementing the ideologies that inspire me as a future designer about to embark on my career.

What I’ve Learned

Prior to my blog writing exercise, I was interested in helping people in distressed neighborhoods through utilization of the design principles that I had been taught throughout my four years at Ball State. However, I have to admit that my views have become altered slightly as a result of my writing and researching exercises. Instead of wanting to help people, I now want to learn from people. People from different backgrounds and different levels of education all have something to say and they all deserve to be listened to. Gathering a sense of what it is like to live in a certain place directly from its residents is far more of a
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learning experience than my four years of college. I may know the basics of design, but experience is the ultimate teacher. After graduation, I will be working in a firm that I enjoy very much, but has a different focus than the type of work that I now dream of doing one day. Writing these blog entries and thinking back critically on them has impassioned me to volunteer through organizations such as Architecture for Humanity, and maybe even places like Sustainable South Bronx and Design 99. They could be a wonderful starting point for a future career in activism and maybe the perfect foundation for my own "aha" moment, the point in which activism becomes the top priority in my life.
Green and the City
AN INSPIRED LOOK AT GREEN IDEOLOGIES WITHIN URBAN ENVIRONMENTS.

4.11.2012

HIPPIES AND ECovILLAGES

During the spring semester of my third year at Ball State, I took a class about real life attempts at utopian communities, otherwise known to the world as communes. I became very interested in reading about them, as they were, for the most part, independent of society. They were off the grid, and didn’t rely on anyone but themselves. This seemed like one of the earliest examples of green living in a modern society. They used local materials when constructing new buildings, they grew their own food, they kept their business and money trade local, and they would even use solar panels and wind power to provide electricity to those people within the commune.

One of the immediate thoughts that came to me as I was reading about these amazing people was, “How can these ideas and values be applied in the real world?” The practices within these communes were wonderful, but seemingly impractical for people who wanted to stay active within their community and the world around them. Can you become environmentally independent without also separating yourself from society? I had the idea that maybe these sustainable practices in lower income areas could reduce the cost of living, increasing the quality of life. Living green is such a practical way to not only help the environment, but to reduce utility costs at the very least. This could help so many people.

The book, Ecovillages: A Practical Guide to Sustainable Communities by Jan Martin Bang became my first source. Bang experienced living in communes first hand and actually helped start a real Ecovillage with others. The book goes through a detailed account of how to plan and build a sustainable, off the grid, community. I was inspired
Green and the City: Hippies and Ecovilages

by the fact that there are really people out there who are willing to change their lifestyles entirely for the sake of the planet. There are many ideas and lessons to take away from this extreme style of living. For example, Bang suggests at one point that when searching for a place to start an Ecovillage, it is better for someone to repurpose an abandoned village, as opposed to building new. This could have huge potential in areas with high home abandonment and foreclosure rates. In the city of Indianapolis alone, there are 12,000 abandoned homes. The magnitude of this issue shocked me beyond belief. This is a problem that needs attention and has great potential solutions through green design.

With that said, it would be very difficult to convince people to apply everything mentioned in that book, especially those used to a more urban setting. While reclaiming materials and using local materials for buildings is a great idea, it might be a challenge to apply some of Bang’s more radical suggestions. This style of community design seems to only lend itself to rural communities. So how can it be adapted for a more practical and widespread implementation?

Questions that came to my mind were as follows: How can we apply the idea of “Ecovillages” on an urban level? Are villages the way to think about this situation when it comes to urban areas? Should we try and apply Bang’s theories on individual household levels? Why won’t the Ecovillage concept be accepted? How can we adapt the ideas found in this book to appeal to a person used to a certain lifestyle?

These questions are understandable considering the radical way in which Bang suggests living. Not many people would be willing, especially if they are used to an urban setting, to go back to basics and start living as their ancestors did. Bang gives many worthwhile suggestions that can be built upon, but this is not the end. The solution to this problem lies in exploring other peoples’ work and thinking critically about new and innovative solutions available to house people within a city.

Check out the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) website!

0 comments:

POST a comment
4.13.2012

SUSTAINABLE SAFETY AND SECURITY

How do we make progress in areas within cities that need it? Institutions like banks are purposely stymieing progressive change within certain neighborhoods. This is a process known as redlining and banks are doing it everywhere. They refuse to provide funding in areas with a bad history without even looking at requests. This is causing a downward spiral in distressed neighborhoods and making things even worse than when they started. Arson cases tend to rise in redlined areas because business owners find it’s cheaper to set fire to their building and collect the insurance money, rather than renovate.

So what are we to do?

Majora Carter, an environmental justice advocate, came to talk at Ball State on March 19th to discuss her “greening the ghetto” motto. I found her talk incredibly inspiring. The work that she has done within her hometown, the Bronx, is amazing. She believes that the act of simply “greening” distressed neighborhoods can restore and revive the morale of an area. Maybe new green buildings aren’t the answer, or at least not right away. Simply planting trees, something that the members of the community can participate in, can inspire people to take pride in their neighborhoods, which is a fantastic first step.

When I first started having these visions of revitalized neighborhoods, I could only see the final product. But how do we get there? It can’t be done all at once because people aren’t always good with drastic change. When I heard Majora speak, it all seemed to click. In order to make progress, it’s necessary to involve the community step by step by allowing them to help, and maybe even to...
create jobs for them. The Bronx Environmental Stewardship Program is something that Majora started that trains unemployed members of the neighborhood to become skilled in environmental practices such as green roof installation. This simple solution turns citizens into taxpayers, rather than tax burdens like they once were.

There are also various green techniques that can be used that have been proven to reduce crime. When environments are designed well, they can increase the sense of safety by reducing fear in a neighborhood. Majora Carter applied this technique in the south Bronx with much success.

We could certainly use more people like Majora Carter in this world. Her commitment to good design and community improvement is truly inspiring. Listening to her story makes me realize how much I still have to learn about community improvement projects. It seems to be important to first and foremost listen to the members of the neighborhood and to involve them as much as possible. Without a doubt, no one knows a place better than those who live in it.

Majora Carter Group

Sustainable South Bronx

Majora’s TED Profile

0 comments:

POST a comment
LEED NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND CHICAGO

In contrast to yesterday’s post, I’d like to comment on commercialized sustainable planning through the United States Green Building Council’s (USGBC) Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED). If you’re a design student such as me, you have undoubtedly heard of LEED its growing popularity within the country as a leader in green design and the promotion of such practices. I believe that LEED has done wonderful things for environmental stewardship within the past few years. It has gotten designers, stakeholders, clients, and even building users to start considering what they can do for the environment by simply making wise decisions while in the design phase.

LEED has been primarily recognized as a tool for single buildings, however there is also something known as LEED Neighborhood Development (ND). This is LEED at a very large scale, and Chicago currently plans to apply it to the southern part of the city, an area almost as large as the loop downtown. Chicago made a commitment to green design years ago, and it is holding true to that still. This project will be a 25 year long redevelopment process that will include new construction, urban infill, and new transit stops, among other ideas. All new buildings built within the area will be required to obtain LEED Silver certification or higher.

The plan is to obtain a fairly evenly distributed range of incomes within the area. There will be affordable housing projects, along with other development ideas, all the way up to nice homes along the lake. This seems like a step in the right direction. Greening a distressed neighborhood on a very large scale is incredibly ambitious and not
entirely surprising considering the great city of Chicago's track record for leading the way in design. On the surface, this idea is very exciting and I am anxious to see how it moves along and what the end result will be.

However, I can't help but wonder what the current residents of the "distressed" area feel about it. Have they been talked to? Have their opinions been asked and considered in the design? Are they going to be displaced? Will their houses be torn down to accommodate all of these new LEED Silver buildings? Will the property values skyrocket after completion, making it so that they can no longer afford their payments and have to move somewhere else? Are there job opportunities for those who live in this neighborhood, or will the construction jobs be given to those who live elsewhere? I worry for the future of these residents. The developers undoubtedly have nothing but the best intentions. They want these people to have a better place to live. But more times than not, when people come in and try to change things in places they don't understand, it fails. I will definitely be looking more into this to gain a greater insight into the project, but until then I will remain slightly skeptical.

Check it out for yourself. Click the links below to check out the USGBC's website and a couple of articles on the South Chicago LEED Neighborhood Development project.

[Image: South Chicago LEED Neighborhood Development Masterplan by Farr Associates]

USGBC

Article: Green Bean Chicago

Farr Associates Design Firm

0 COMMENTS:

[Link: greenandthecitybsu.blogspot.com/2012/04/leed-neighborhood-development-and.html]
What causes a neighborhood to fall into distress? Arguments could be made for many different factors, but I would like to focus on jobs. When members of a community no longer have a sense of purpose in their jobs, they disconnect themselves. So in order for communities to come back together, we need to try to bring the jobs back to the community. Chains and other mainstream jobs that appear are typically completely separated from the things that are going on around them. New Work New Culture, an ideology by Frithjof Bergmann promotes reinventing work to reinvent communities.

What is New Work New Culture? According to Bergmann’s website, one half of New Work is a transformation from industrial to community production. “The result will be the creation of new enterprises, but also progressively the increasing local production of food, housing, and energy, and equally of furniture, appliances and clothing, and beyond that of still more of what is needed for a pleasurable, modern and fulfilling life.” The idea may be radical, but there might just be something to it. If people in distressed and even poverty stricken areas begin being employed in their own neighborhoods doing work that benefits their community, they will generally invest more of themselves toward the betterment of their area. This allows communities to be economically self-reliant.

For example, Bergmann worked with HIV positive children in Africa to help them produce vertical gardens from compost generated in their village. This allows the children to produce the fruits and vegetables that they need for a healthy diet. Community-reliant economies are the idea behind Bergmann’s New Work concept. These ideas which have been applied to remote villages are now
starting to be applied to areas like Detroit and Flint. The Boggs Center in Detroit is exploring this idea currently in their blog.

While reflecting on this new find, I realized that these ideologies are very similar to the communes that I discussed in my first blog entry. Bringing the economy back to a community scale and trying to be as self sufficient as possible is the grounds behind most environmental communes. Bergmann’s idea just seems to work better when applied to urban environments.

So why discuss this in a green blog? Because self-sufficiency is what the green movement is all about. Sustainability literally means the ability to sustain oneself on its own. Green ideologies go beyond buildings and parks and green roofs. In order for us to truly embrace sustainability, it needs to become a lifestyle, not just a buzzword.
Yesterday I attended the lecture by Frances Halsband and Natalie Rebuck (both Ball State alums) of Kliment Halsband Architects out of New York City. Their talk had to do with sustainable design through adaptive reuse and historic preservation. It was inspiring to see "100 year" buildings being renovated and added to delicately and with the intent of making them last for another 100 years. New construction buildings that are built with green principles in mind are great, but the most sustainable solution is always to not build at all. Renovating and restoring old buildings to make them more efficient is really the most environmentally conscious decision that designers could make.

I think the most impressive case study that Frances Halsband discussed was Gilman Hall at Johns Hopkins University. The firm took a nearly hundred year old building the campus and transformed it into an efficient, socially effective, and modern rendition of its old self. They did a fantastic job of keeping the historic character of the building while incorporating modern elements.

As designers, we need to be thinking like Kliment Halsband Architects. We need to design buildings to be "100 year old buildings," instead of cutting corners to save money in the short term. Why are quality, long lasting buildings so hard to come by? Is it really because of budget? It is the responsibility of the designer to fight for good design. It is possible to design something long lasting and efficient on a budget. We cannot let anyone convince us to settle for anything less than the best.

When hearing this lecture, I couldn't help but think that this ideology could be applied to old, abandoned buildings within cities. To reduce costs for investors...
and for future residents, it might be more pertinent to simply use what we are already given. Why break new ground for new buildings when there are thousands of abandoned buildings in any given city? Applying this on a residential level could revitalize distressed neighborhoods. Finding the funding for this would be an issue to discuss, however, the cost of renovating would probably be much less than the cost of bulldozing, or even setting fires and collecting insurance money for business owners (see my second entry in this blog to learn about redlining).

As Americans, we very much live in a throw away society. This ideology has been applied even to the buildings in which we occupy. When did we go from designing our buildings to last to designing our buildings to save money? On every corner of almost every city in America we can find badly designed buildings that won't last 20 years. When we start thinking more like we did 100 years ago, the design profession will have been changed for the better.

Kliment Halsband Architects

0 comments:

Post a comment
Why do architects want to become architects? Is it to design buildings that will make them famous? For some, there is a good chance that this is true. However, for most of us, I think it's because we want to make a difference in the lives of the people we are designing for. Architecture has that power, and it is a wonderful one. It is also one that can be overlooked very easily.

I just read an article that was circulating around Facebook from ArchDaily entitled, After the Meltdown: Where does Architecture go from here? By Vanessa Quirk. It explored very well the idea of "architecture for the 99%," or bringing design to clients that would have previously been thought of as "undeserved communities." Usually, those who can pay for design are those that receive it. But who exactly are the people who need it most? Those would be the billions of people in the U.S. and around the world that are living in unsafe and badly designed environments. Why is it that these people do not get the help they need? I believe it is because they cannot pay for the services.

The article argues, and so do I, that since the economy has gone downhill, it is entirely feasible for a firm that "does good" to make good business sense as well. Quirk used the example of the design firm Model of Architecture Serving Society (or MASS). They are a non-profit bringing...
Green and the City: Non-Profits and the Non-Traditional Client

good design to the traditionally underserved population. They garnered such great press from their projects that they are beginning to receive paid commissions. It is also worth mentioning Architecture for Humanity. This is a non-profit that has grown immensely since starting, now utilizing a network of 50,000 architects in 25 countries, doing nothing but good work for clients who truly deserve it.

So why is it that doing non-profit work is still generally looked down upon by traditionalists? Because the high profile work has always been the marker of success for firms. But what happens when that work is no longer available? Architects will have to find other outlets for their training and talent. With the economy the way that it is, that is exactly what is beginning to happen. When other markets close, we need to find new ones to explore. Designing for people whose lives will truly be impacted by architecture is an immense and exciting opportunity for a new market. One that I think will eventually bring a deeper purpose to what designers do.

The article began with a quote from Cameron Sinclair of Architecture for Humanity that I believe is key to how we should look at design now and in the future, not only in practice but in education as well. He said, “If you focus on design, you can call yourself a designer. If you focus on the implementation of your design, you can call yourself an architect.” So I go back to the beginning when I asked why architects really want to be architects. In all honesty, shouldn’t our goal be to use design as a vehicle to sincerely change the lives of others? It is when we step away from ourselves and begin to think about the power of our design on others that I believe we will truly be fulfilled as architects.
I COMMENTS:

WES JANZ  APR 18, 2012  08:04 AM

Yes, Lindsay, thanks for this post. A couple of quick thoughts:

Architecture for Humanity does not "employ" 50,000 architects. They just don't... there's no such big payroll involved. Not even close. Many of their workers are volunteers. It might be that some of their local architect-partners are paid a living wage by other local or global nonprofits, etc., etc. But no, they are not much of a model for us in terms of trying to figure out how to be the sort of architect you're imagining and earning a local living wage (much less a salary so someone can pay off a student loan). I mean, I know Cameron and Kate personally and what they are doing is fantastic. Just to say to you, they do not employ 50,000 architects.

Yeah, it's fairly common for us to talk about what we want to give to others, what we want to do for other deserving people. Again, to me, this is a view based on sympathy. I strongly encourage you to be empathetic. To see our role as needing to understand others and not to feel sorry for others. Work alongside someone else. Acknowledge that local people are intelligent and that we can learn from them. Be a good listener.

And yes, I agree with the Detroit activist, 97-year-old Grace Lee Boggs. In her "Living for Change" autobiography, where she states: "This is the key to the distinction between rebellion and revolution. Rebellion is a stage in the development of revolution... but it is not revolution. It is an important stage because it represents the standing up of the oppressed. Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question its legitimacy and the supposed permanence of existing institutions. A rebellion disrupts the society, but it does not provide what is necessary to make a revolution and establish a new social order. To make a revolution, people must not only struggle against existing institutions. They must make a philosophical/spiritual leap and become more human beings. In order to change the world, they must change themselves."

Grace believes, ultimately, that we much change ourselves, and not be so determined to change someone else.

Just some things to think about...

Wes.
Green and the City: Street Art and Pushing Boundaries

Many of us, myself included, get in the mindset that we want to change the world. It's exciting and invigorating, but at the same time, completely overwhelming. Sometimes, it's the little things in life that can make the biggest difference, if only for a short time. JR, an anonymous French street artist, is someone who is responsible for moments like these. Although this entry doesn't specifically focus on sustainability, it does focus on community, creativity, and changing spaces.

I came across JR from an article on worldchanging.com. He was named the 2011 TED prizewinner. Like many of us, JR aspires to change the world, but the big picture doesn't overwhelm him. He simply does what he does best, and if he gets a few smiles out of it, he is happy. JR is known for pasting huge black and white photos of faces of the local people, wherever his projects lead him. He pastes them on walls, sidewalks, roofs, the sides of buses, and even the bottoms of empty pools.

His projects span the globe and each is unique because he focuses on the people within the community. I think the most interesting aspect of his art is that most of it is illegal. He pastes images all over public and private property, something that does not sit well with everyone. His projects have gained such positive acclaim, however,
that he is now doing many paid commissions and his work is even being featured in art galleries.

It is amazing how simply pasting blown-up images of everyone and their neighbor can bring a community together in joy. Some of his projects include portraits pasted to the sides of buildings in the slums of Paris, images posted on both sides of the wall that divides Israel and Palestine, and portraits of local women pasted almost everywhere in the slums of Kenya. The latter project was particularly interesting to me because there is a short video documentary that goes along with it. The backgrounds of these women are profiled and many of them have deeply suffered. They have seen war, death, rape, and an unbelievable amount of pain, and yet when they are asked to make whatever face they like for the portraits, they are, more often times than not, extremely comical and light hearted. This project was entitled “Women are Heroes” and they most definitely are. See the video posted in this entry. Even in the hardest of times, communities of people will hold onto what is good in life.

The above statement is true of all humankind. Many times people will look at the lives of others and pity them. They wonder how anyone could live like they do. I think as Americans, most of us find ourselves thinking along these lines a lot because we feel very lucky to have been brought up in a country such as ours. But are we so lucky? We shouldn’t be so quick to judge. The people who live in “slums” can sometimes be some of the happiest people in the world. Maybe they don’t have all of the material items that we do, but they know what is most important in life. I think that this is the message that JR is trying to portray in his street art, and I hope that he continues to push the boundaries of legality in his work. Pushing and challenging preconceptions is the best way to invoke thought and to promote change.

JR's Website:

jenandthecitybsu.blogspot.com/2012/04/street-art-and-pushing-boundaries.html
One of the first questions you will inevitably be asked after meeting someone is some variation of, “where is home for you?” That is a testament to the importance of the place that you are from and/or where you now reside. Home is where your heart is, so they say, and there are so many memories attached to it for everyone and it is forever a part of you in one way or another. We can change our home many times in life, but there is usually a deep connection that one has with each place they live.

The article, The Psychology of Home: Why Where You Live Means So Much by Julie Beck dives deep into what home means to each of us. Something she said at one point really struck me as a design student, and that was, “People and the places where they reside are engaged in a continuing set of exchanges; they have determinate, mutual effects upon each other because they are part of a single, interactive system.” In other words, your home is an extension of yourself. This is why we love to personalize it and fill it with meaningful things that represent who we are. It is why moving can be so painful, and why losing your house in a disaster can feel like losing a family member.

Residential designers have thought about the importance of this for countless years, I’m sure, but I’m wondering why more community designers don’t take this into consideration. Just like a single residence is considered someone’s home, so is their hometown. This is why communities that provide outlets for its residents to express themselves, to personalize it, seem to be more successful than others. Towns filled with public art done by its residents, businesses owned by the locals, public spaces that allow neighbors to gather and share ideas, and other outlets of localized expression are markers of a well-kept hometown.

These core ideals of a wonderful community lend itself well to a green
community as well. Many green concepts center on the idea of localization: economies, food, materials, transportation, etc. It seems to be a no-brainer. Creating a sense of home on a larger community scale could be as easy as allowing free and public expression of its residents' creativity. Who wouldn't want to make their mark on their hometown?

0 comments:

POST A COMMENT
CITIZENS AND ACTIVISTS

We see protests and marches, such as the most recent Occupy Wall Street protests, go on frequently in our society. The wonderful thing about our country is that we have the freedom and the right to voice our opinions anywhere on American soil. Many times, the people we see trying to make a difference in the world, the ones pushing change and revolution, are young Americans. The young people always seem to try and make the world a better place to live in, while the older citizens remain stuck in their ways. But one woman, Grace Lee Boggs, has been working to make a difference and to challenge the status quo for over 70 years.

Boggs is a 96-year-old Chinese American activist and philosopher that has been working to change the world in many ways since she received her doctorate in 1940. She has fought for black power, tenant’s rights in Chicago, women’s rights, and now community activism in Detroit, where she has lived for the past 50 years. This woman has truly dedicated her entire life to activism, which is incredibly inspiring. A woman such as her must be pretty set in her ways, you would think. Actually, according to her, it is quite the opposite. In an interview for the upcoming documentary on her life entitled, “American Revolutionary,” she said that she used to think that a true activist held their ground and never changed their beliefs. But she stated that she has come to believe that agreeing to change is much more honorable than refusing to change.

Her intelligence is incredible and I am inspired by her work ethic and the way that she carries herself, even at such an advanced age. She seems to be a woman of great character, strength, and confidence. It is no wonder she has
Green and the City: Citizens and Activists

become an icon, especially in the city of Detroit, where most of her work is currently focused. Books have been written about her, a documentary made, and The Boggs Center in Detroit is named after her and her late husband. She has accomplished a lot in the last 70 years and she is appreciated by countless people.

Currently, she is focused on community activism within Detroit. She started Detroit Summer, a youth program that focuses on improving neighborhoods through painting murals, planting gardens, and conversations on how to improve the city of Detroit. This summer marks the program's 20th anniversary.

As I continue to study sustainability within communities, I am learning more and more that it takes inspired people to make change within a neighborhood. Not only inspired people, but people who are committed to a place and are willing to put their whole spirit into it. It is easy for anyone to come into a community from the outside and think they know what needs to change, but it is really only the people who live there that know. They are the people who care, and they are the people who will be committed to fight for change and to stick with it. Grace Lee Boggs is one of those people, and I'm sure she will continue to be for the rest of her life.

American Revolutionary Film
Boggs Center

1 comments:

wes janz  APR 29, 2012 01:46 PM

Lindsay.

yes, a couple of things.

--IT IS DEFINITELY NOT THE CASE THAT "WE HAVE THE FREEDOM AND THE RIGHT TO VOICE OUR OPINIONS ANYWHERE ON AMERICAN SOIL." NEXT TIME YOU'RE WAITING IN THE SECURITY LINE AT THE AIRPORT SAY SOMETHING LIKE "THIS IS A COMPLETE WASTE OF TIME" AND SEE WHAT IS DONE TO YOU OR NEXT TIME YOU'RE OUTSIDE A FEDERAL COURTHOUSE SAY "THE JUDICIARY SHOULD BE OVERTHROWN" AND SEE HOW LONG IT TAKES BEFORE YOU ARE IN HANDCUFFS. IF I WERE TO START SAYING TO UNDERGRADUATES THAT THEIR EDUCATION IS TOO EXPENSIVE AND THEY SHOULD DROP OUT OF SCHOOL, IT WOULDN'T TAKE LONG BEFORE I'D BE IN HUGE TROUBLE AT BALL STATE. ALWAYS REMEMBER, TRAVON MARTIN IS DEAD.

--YES, ABOUT GRACE LEE BOGGS AND YOUR STATEMENT: "AGREEING TO CHANGE IS MUCH MORE HONORABLE THAN REFUSING TO CHANGE." ABSOLUTELY. GRACE TERMS SUCH PERSONAL EVOLUTION AS THE TRAITS OF AN "ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL." IN HER WRITING, SHE MAKES CONSISTENT REFERENCES TO MALCOLM X AS BEING ONE OF THE MOST PROFUND ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS THAT SHE EVER KNEW.
AND YES. HERE'S A GREAT QUOTE FROM GRACE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY LIVING FOR CHANGE IN WHICH SHE BOTH EXPRESSES THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REBELLION AND REVOLUTION AND THE RESPONSIBILITY WE HAVE NOT TO CHANGE THE WORLD, BUT TO BE CHANGED BY THE WORLD:

"THIS IS THE KEY TO THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN REBELLION AND REVOLUTION. REBELLION IS A STAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF REVOLUTION BUT IT IS NOT REVOLUTION. IT IS AN IMPORTANT STAGE BECAUSE IT REPRESENTS THE STANDING UP OF THE OPPRESSED. REBELLIONS BREAK THE THREADS THAT HAVE BEEN HOLDING THE SYSTEM TOGETHER AND THROW INTO QUESTION ITS LEGITIMACY AND THE SUPPOSED PERMANENCE OF EXISTING INSTITUTIONS. A REBELLION DISRUPTS THE SOCIETY BUT IT DOES NOT PROVIDE WHAT IS NECESSARY TO MAKE A REVOLUTION AND ESTABLISH A NEW SOCIAL ORDER. TO MAKE A REVOLUTION, PEOPLE MUST NOT ONLY STRUGGLE AGAINST EXISTING INSTITUTIONS. THEY MUST MAKE A PHILOSOPHICAL/SPIRITUAL LEAP AND BECOME MORE HUMAN HUMANS. IN ORDER TO CHANGE/TRANSFORM THE WORLD, THEY MUST CHANGE/TRANSFORM THEMSELVES."

THANKS.

--End.
Earth Day has been celebrated around the world since 1970, and it becomes more and more relevant to our society every year. As the environment continues to be threatened, awareness will become even more important. Every year on April 22nd, people around the world come together to educate others, to bring awareness to the world, and to help the environment in some way.

What do you think of when you hear someone talking about Earth Day? I know I tend to think only of hippies marching with awareness signs and local organizations handing out trees for people to plant. However, after doing some more research, I found out a lot more about the efforts being made around the world to bring awareness to a variety of environmental and sustainability issues. These photos of Earth Day around the world are very interesting. Occupy Wall Street protestors in New York camped out in front of a BP gas station, thousands of cyclists ride across Budapest, volunteers clean up the coast of Freedom Island in Manila, and citizens of Tokyo, Japan protest nuclear power. A group in Washington, D.C. and the Earth Day Network made a full event of the day by holding a concert, urging the world to do a “billion acts of green,” spreading awareness about population control in a unique way (they passed out condoms with pictures of endangered animals on the wrappers), hosting the EPA’s National Sustainable Design Expo, and an EcoVillage with interactive exhibits.

While Earth Day is incredibly important for awareness purposes, the lessons learned should be incorporated into our daily lives. The day is in place to
try and make “being green” seem easy and accessible to the average citizen. However, is it really this simple? It’s great that the message is being spread, but is turning your lights off when you leave the room, recycling, and walking to work really going to do much in the scheme of things? Climate change is such an unfathomably large problem that these things seem trivial. The only way to really reverse the effects would be to take action through government regulations and drastic changes in our lives.

Designers are trying to do their part through the environmental design movement. It is becoming a requirement in many places to build green, which is a step in the right direction. But is it enough? We just have to continue to do all that we can and hope for the best. We can only hope that it doesn’t take an environmental catastrophe to wake everyone up to the realities of global climate change.

Learn More about D.C.’s Earth Day Event

0 Comments:

Post a Comment
CHINA AND THE LOW-CARBON REVOLUTION

Will the Green Revolution be the next Industrial Revolution? There is no doubt that the Industrial revolution changed our world drastically. The ability to mass-produce products quickly and efficiently boosted economies everywhere. However, its effects are now upon us. Global climate change is threatening us as a species and something needs to be done about it. Is it possible for us to turn around and reverse the effects of the Industrial Revolution through a new and powerful movement through sustainability?

The two nations most responsible for the amount of carbon in the atmosphere are China and the U.S. Both have extremely immense manufacturing abilities. Both economies have flourished at one point or another due to the Industrialization of their nation. Slowly, possibly detrimentally so, the U.S. seems to be responding to the climate change crisis by promoting tax breaks to businesses and individuals who incorporate alternative energy sources such as solar, wind, and ground-source, into their buildings and homes. However, could they be doing more? If we are to reverse the effects of the Industrial Revolution, we must try to match it with an equally strong Green Revolution. Sir Nicholas Stern, Chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at the London School of Economics made the following comment in the article, China's Urban Low Carbon Future in Shanghai on worldchanging.com, "The low-carbon economy is a new industrial revolution. Low-carbon growth is cleaner, safer, and far more attractive, while high-carbon growth will kill itself. China is well placed for this industrial revolution." China brought up its plans for such a movement at the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai.

China is definitely one of the countries most in need of a significant green revolution. A few years ago, they surpassed the U.S. as the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gasses. They have responded with a very strict action plan that would result in "5 low-carbon provinces and 8 low-carbon cities." They are
effectively turning low-carbon and green ideologies into a new way of life.

Baoding, one of these low-carbon cities, added 20,000 new jobs in solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources.

The World Expo itself was conducted in a very green way. Nearly 500 new green technologies were showcased at the event in its many pavilions. Each country's pavilion repeatedly emphasized the importance of reversing climate change. In fact, the Expo seemed to make sustainability its main focus. The Chinese intended to educate everyone who attended the Expo, about 73 million people, about climate change and why it is important to change.

China is serious about reversing their damage on the atmosphere. Their comprehensive plan will affect 27% of the nation's population and one third of its total economic output. They planned for this to be implemented into nearly all aspects of Chinese life. City planning, education, industrial, economic, and social planning are just a few. According to China's Premier Wen Jiabao, "Eco-friendly development and dissemination of renewable energy sources and new materials will influence the way we live and will lead the course of industrial development in the future."

Why is it that the U.S. isn't taking this as seriously as China? It is true that China emits more carbon than us, but why should that stop us from launching a full-fledged plan of action to nip climate change in the bud? The bottom line is that we need to start taking our effects on the atmosphere much more seriously than we have been. We should be using China as a model for this. The Green Revolution should be our next step, turning sustainability into its own economy. It might be radical, but I believe that is exactly what we need in order to save ourselves and our environment from perishing.

China's Efforts to Reduce Carbon Emissions

China Surpasses the U.S. as #1 Carbon Emitter

0 COMMENTS:

POST A COMMENT

greenandthecitybsu.blogspot.com/2012/04/china-and-low-carbon-revolution.html
AFFORDABLE PUBLIC HOUSING AND SOCIAL STIGMAS

The goal of public housing is to provide a safe, healthy, and affordable place for people to live; generally for those with a low to moderate-income level. With the economy in the state that it is, public housing is needed now more than ever. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the definition of affordability when it comes to housing is that renters or homeowners do not pay more than 30% of their yearly income on housing. HUD states that currently, “An estimated 12 million renter and homeowner households now pay more than 50 percent of their annual incomes for housing, and a family with one full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford the local fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States.” So what is the problem? Why is public housing not meeting its high demand? Although it is something that is greatly needed, the effectiveness of affordable public housing has been debated for many decades.

Why would someone not agree to a new public housing project proposed in his or her neighborhood? It seems to be the perfect solution; we can avoid the build-up of dilapidated, abandoned, unhealthy, and unsafe properties in low-income neighborhoods by building new, or renovated, affordable solutions. However, some people are not advocates of this. There is a strong stigma associated with such projects, and I can certainly understand why in some instances. Infamous projects such as the federally funded Pruitt-Igoe housing project have in some respects rightfully given public housing a bad name. Pruitt-Igoe was completed in St. Louis in 1956. The designers had every good intention, but it goes down in the records as one of the biggest failures in public housing history. I won’t go into all of the complex details that make up the reason for the inevitable failure, but one thing is for certain. The catastrophic disaster that was Pruitt-Igoe, and projects like it, negatively colored the minds and opinions of many
people when it came to affordable housing.

The main arguments people seem to make when public housing projects are placed next to their homes are concerns of declining property values and possible drug and crime rate increases. According to the Center for Housing Policy’s briefing, “Don’t Put It Here!” there is a large concern that public housing will decrease the value of the properties around it. However, the briefing found that this concern is mostly untrue. In fact, more often than not, it either has a positive or a neutral effect. Very rarely is there a negative impact. When negative impacts were found, it was typically because of something that could have been handled better. The Center for Housing Policy suggests attractive and well-blended designs, responsible management and maintenance, revitalization of run-down properties, placing projects in economically stable neighborhoods, and building them in a relatively moderate to high concentration, to avoid decline in surrounding property values.

Such views also exist that lower income residents do not deserve such nice, new places. Last semester, I did a project for my Cultural and Social Issues class with classmates Michelle Novotny, Destiny Conei, and Tori Brown in which we studied a HUD granted project, Millennium Place, here in Muncie, Indiana. Tony Costello, one of the architects and educators that we interviewed mentioned that this was a problem among some people within the city of Muncie. They would drive by Millennium Place and say such things as, “This is nicer than what I live in,” and “They don’t deserve that.” Obviously, this is not the opinion of most people, but the fact that this mindset exists is deeply disturbing to me. The people who live in affordable housing projects are people just like us with families to support and the basic right to a safe and healthy place to live. Check out our short documentary at the end of this post.

Stigmas are hard to overcome, but with the right knowledge and understanding, we can work toward a steady acceptance of the truth. Unfortunately Pruitt-Igoe and similar projects were a sad reality that gave people a bad impression of what public housing is like. However, new and successful projects are popping up everyday, as discussed in the article “Affordable Housing That Doesn’t Scream ‘Affordable’” by Allison Arieff of the The Atlantic Cities. There is still hope for affordable housing, which is extremely promising in an economy such as ours that warrants such a growing demand for it.
2 comments:

**Wes Janz**  Apr 29, 2012 08:28 PM

Yes Lindsay, I very much like the comments by Tony and Olon and by the student voiceover. Stating that a very good place to begin our work as designers is with one person, with an individual. Maybe someone who wants a porch, who will take care of a front yard, who will sweep the sidewalk. The one-word descriptions -- Phoenix, Hope, Home, Uplifting -- are powerful and encouraging and optimistic. Have you seen the documentary The Pruitt-Igoe Myth? It's very very good in presenting both the scourge that Pruitt-Igoe came to be, and the positive impact it had on some of the residents' lives. Olon and I showed it at the Fourth World Film Festival a few weeks ago at the Herron School of Art and Design, and Olon showed it in the Architecture Building as well. Thanks.

**Lindsay Gregory**  Apr 29, 2012 08:25 PM

Yes, thank you for the comment! I have seen *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*. We watched it in the same class that my classmates and I made this video for. We modeled a lot of our commentary and interviews and the general set up of this documentary after the movie. Pam Harwood was our instructor and it was a very rewarding course.
ABANDONED HOUSES AND ART INSTALLATIONS

Abandoned homes are a huge issue in any metropolitan area. As mentioned in my first entry, *Hippies and Ecowillages*, there are nearly 12,000 abandoned homes just in Indianapolis. The problem is much worse in more economically distressed cities such as Detroit. The solution that the city typically has to such a problem is to just tear them down. They are seen as eyesores and breeding grounds for crime-ridden activity. This idea is not completely unfounded. Abandoned homes provide an ideal place for crime to happen and for squatters to take over. My question is why tear down all of these structures? Why not use them as a basis for restoring communities?

Detroit-based husband and wife team, Gina Reichert and Mitch Cope, are doing just that. They founded Design 99, an art and design group that works to create new models of contemporary art and architectural practice. They accomplish many things, but one of them is to provide cheap design services to those who need it. They even make house calls for $99. They soon began to make houses that stand out their mission. Reichert and Cope reside in a declining neighborhood in Detroit, and they started noticing the growing number of abandoned homes on the block, wishing to do something about it. According to the article, “Design 99: Bringing the Neighbor Back to the Hood” by the Kendall College of Art and Design at Ferris State University, “Abandoned and burned-out houses stand next to occupied homes. Alleyways and vacant lots are cluttered with garbage and rubbish. Working in a four-block radius, Design 99 sees the neighborhood and the homes as their canvas, and the litter as their materials.”

Their original project has become a beacon of light and a landmark for the neighborhood; “Power House” is an experimental canvas for Design 99. The couple purchased the foreclosed property for...
Green and the City: Abandoned Houses and Art Installations

POWER HOUSE

$1500 and have been adding to it ever since.

It has become, "a design laboratory, an installation space and guest house for visiting artists," according to the Ferris State article. Painted in striped pastel colors, it absolutely stands out from the other properties in the neighborhood. It also stands completely off the grid thanks to its wind generator and PV solar panels. These are all wonderful points, but what has been its impact, you might wonder? It has in fact sparked a neighborhood revival.

They have also reclaimed an abandoned garage, replacing its doors with stained glass, which has become a gathering place for the neighbors and something for them to be proud of. Not only do they purchase old properties and spruce them up, but they love bringing local artists together to do art installations all over the neighborhood. A painted wooden art piece stuck through a broken window adds color and beauty where one might not expect it, an old boat with artistic additions brightens up an abandoned lot, and a "Garbage Totem" turns trash that was found around the neighborhood into an art installation, bringing attention to the huge problem of littering and trash dumping all over Detroit.

This community that once was filled with desolate and depressing structures has been revitalized thanks for the work of Design 99. It is now an inspiring place, an artist community, and a glimpse into the future for the potential behind abandoned properties. Working or volunteering for people such as Reichert and Cope would undoubtedly be inspiring and fulfilling. If I ever visit Detroit, I would absolutely plan a visit to the Power House and to Design 99's storefront.

2 comments:

Anonymous Apr 30, 2012 06:26 PM

This is awesome! These houses just need a little love. I hate to see them torn down. We are living in such a disposable society. We need to stop throwing our history away. Re-use it, re-claim it, re-design it and then pass it on.

Reply delete

Anonymous Apr 30, 2012 06:48 PM

It is quite telling of society as a whole and the mentality that arises within a culture. If there is no sense of community how can people possibly find the energy to keep their home in shape if the neighbor they barely know treats their home with disdain? The sense...
OF OWNERSHIP AND PRIDE IS LOST AND THE CARE TAKING OF ONE’S POSSESSIONS FALLS BY THE WAYSIDE. THIS THINKING CAN SLOWLY BE JUSTIFIED IF MORE AND MORE PEOPLE WITHIN THE COMMUNITY ALLOW DOWNFALL. IT BECOMES DEPRESSING AND CAN TURN THE WHOLE DEVELOPMENT ON ITS HEAD. THEN THE OWNER OF THE BUILDING COULD EASILY FALL INTO THIS MENTALITY BECAUSE THE UPKEEP IS NO LONGER WORTH IT BECAUSE THEIR TENANTS WONT KEEP FAST ON THE FRONT LINE.

I LIKE WHAT THIS COUPLE IS DOING BECAUSE IT BRINGS LIGHT INTO THESE ABANDONED PLACES. IT BRINGS HOPE, RENEWAL, AND SPRING TIME FEELINGS OF LIFE. AS A CHILD, REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE WAS A COMMON MANTRA WITHIN MY TOWNSHIP AND IT FEELS LIKE THIS MENTALITY IS PUT TO ACTION THROUGH THE EFFORTS OF GINA AND MITCH. IF MORE PEOPLE TOOK THE TIME TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR THINGS ESPECIALLY THEIR OWN WELL BEING, OUR COMMUNITIES WOULD BE LIVELIER AND HEALTHIER PLACES. IT IS JUST LIKE THAT OLD PROVERB “WATCH YOUR THOUGHTS, THEY BECOME WORDS, WATCH YOUR WORDS, BECAUSE THEY BECOME ACTIONS…” IT CAN BE USED FOR GOOD OR EVIL AND IT IS HIGH TIME IT IS USED FOR POSITIVE CHANGE.


Arieff, Allison. "Affordable Housing That Doesn't Scream 'Affordable"


