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AIA FEATURE

Rebuilding Trust

Community-led design seeks to dispel myths about who best understands how to shape public space.

By [PATRICK SISSON FOR AIA ARCHITECT](#)

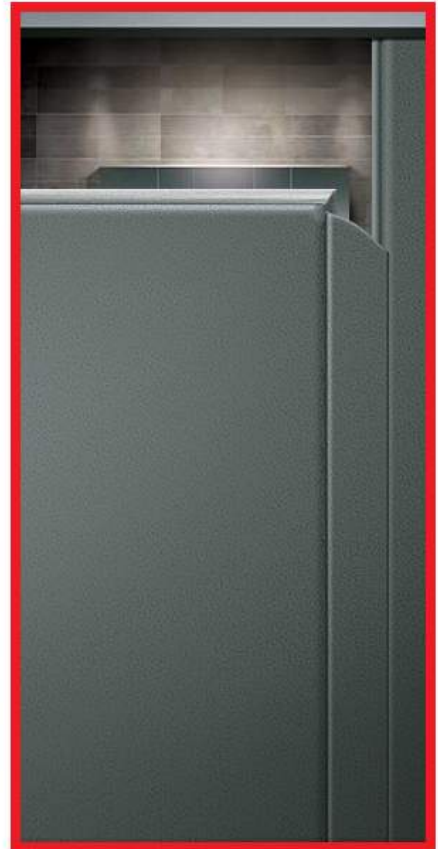


MASS Design Group

A 2015 MASS Design Group project for Colorado College utilized beetle-killed pine.

For Chicago-based architect and designer Craig Stevenson, it's always been vital to work with, not for, the community.

Stevenson is director of the Chicago's chapter of the [Open Architecture Collaborative](#) (OAC)—a national nonprofit that does pro bono work designing buildings and placemaking projects for local communities. The realities of working in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, and the recent wave of protests over police brutality and the death of George Floyd, have made outreach and community engagement even more essential tools for facing an “existential crisis.”



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"It's an interesting challenge to design when fear and grief is prevalent," he says.

Stevenson is part of a team working on Under the Grid, a kind of reverse High Line for the North Lawndale neighborhood in Chicago that aims to turn vacant lots underneath rail lines—specifically a stretch of the Pink Line of the city's elevated train system—into a park, community green space, and gathering place. The ongoing project seeks to spark interest and re-emergence in art and the business corridor—a place for farmers markets, basketball, and dance events, created in concert with community groups, local businesses, and residents. To do so, the group has been holding hackathons and meetings with community groups as part of OAC's goal to democratize design, flatten hierarchies, and dispel myths about just who understands how to shape public space and how it can best serve a community.

"We're not here to impose solutions on people," he says. "It's about figuring out how the community wants to solve the immediate need for public space, and the best solutions to bring people together."

A New Challenge

In coming years, architects will be challenged like never before to help disadvantaged communities rebuild after these crises. Neighborhoods across the nation have been irrevocably changed by coronavirus and protests, both of which have altered perceptions of public space.

Listening, responding, and shaping future designs around neighborhood needs will become even more vital. And while some might see the time and effort involved in garnering feedback and engaging in community-led design as a luxury, that would be a mistake, according to architects and designers who place equity, community feedback, and social justice at the center of their practice. When resources are scarce, the value of truly reflecting the community in design, hearing about their struggles and trauma, and getting their buy-in is immeasurable.

"Architecture often sets itself up to be an expendable service, a luxury," says Liz Ogbu, a designer, urbanist, and social innovator who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley. "We should do work that's vital to people's day-to-day ability to live their life. During the last recession, I worked for a small nonprofit, and while there was a culling of the industry—a third lost their jobs—I never feared, because the work we were doing was essential. Community-based work is about creating tools that let people thrive and live their best stories. That's what success looks like to me."

It's a priority that the profession as a whole is being increasingly challenged to meet. "Democratizing the decision-making and design of the built environment is critical to both the future relevance of our profession and a truly equitable society," says William Bates, FAIA, 2019 president of AIA.

It's instructive to look at the Great Recession of 2008, and the birth of placemaking, as architects adjust to new financial realities, Ogbu says. With city budgets on hold back then, the DIY/guerrilla approach created an opening for smaller street-level projects. In the coming years, communities recovering



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For smaller, street-level projects in the coming year, communities recovering from historic disinvestment, a pandemic, and the loss of so many small businesses will look to the kind of rapid response design, such as parklets and pop-ups, that flourished in the early 2010s.

This approach also offers quick ways to help neighborhoods recover. Coronavirus has exposed long-standing social inequities, says Sara Aye, executive director of [Greater Good Studio](#), a Chicago-based social design practice. People of color and low-income people, who were already marginalized, have been further marginalized in the management and containment of the outbreak. Any project purporting to help needs to first engage with these uncomfortable truths.

"If you design something for a group of people, but not with them, you're not doing it for them, you're imposing upon them," Aye says. "You're assuming the role of a savior, that your expertise outweighs their lived experience. These assumptions aren't just dangerous, they add up to irreparable harm."

For Aye, whose specialty—like a [recent multi-city collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) to help local groups design children's health programs—is process, what's required now goes beyond the typical methods of listening and outreach. Design teams can't rely on the traditional engagement checklist and community meetings, which typically exclude those who can't take time off or obtain childcare, and often favor louder, more organized, and more white voices (Katherine Einstein, a Boston University professor and researcher, has analyzed who speaks at public meetings and found a significant racial divide and under-representation of people of color).

Language is key to engagement, Aye says. Don't ask about problems someone faces, projections of the future, or the needs or dreams of a community at a time when compounding crises make that sound slightly tone deaf. Start with questions that honor the moment and ground feedback in lived reality, with inquiries about daily activities, fears, attitudes, and small improvements.

As fears of coronavirus make some of the preferred methods of in-person outreach—listening sessions, setting up pop-up booths at fairs and public events, door-to-door surveys, and small group meetings—impossible, digital means have become more prevalent. That's created fear of a digital divide, says Katherine Darnstadt, AIA, architect and founder of Chicago's Latent Design. But it's not so simple. Done right, digital meetings can actually encourage more interaction, and they can be recorded and remain online well beyond the live event, inviting more feedback from those who can't attend.

"Establishing a digital footprint doesn't solve every access issue, but it can make it easier for a larger number of people to connect," Darnstadt says. "But more doesn't always mean better. Policymakers need to change the status quo of how they intake and utilize feedback."

Seizing the Moment

As cities and neighborhoods begin to reopen, rapid prototypes and small-scale projects for commercial districts will be a focus due to changing regulations, the growing needs of local businesses, and evolving health guidelines. Darnstadt believes architects need to seize the moment and

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advocate not just good design, but for reforming processes and cutting costs that further benefit the community. How can policies be nudged in a direction that allows for quicker deployment of car-free streets, outdoor dining areas, public space, or pick-up and drop-off zones? Can designers reappropriate common items, such as sawhorses or other materials used by municipal authorities, for other purposes? For instance, in early June, Darnstadt offered to do pro bono work to help damaged businesses rebuild, which required design from a licensed architect; can that process be accelerated?

“We need to look at temporary solutions that allow us to critically analyze what a more permanent solution looks like,” she says. “It’s not a fixed, start-and-stop process.”

Darnstadt’s Boombox project, a series of small, 8-by-20-foot portable pop-up shops for small Chicago businesses, exemplifies her vision for mobile, malleable design. To create these low-budget, floating storefronts for small businesses and entrepreneurs out of shipping containers and cement board, Darnstadt met with potential operators and nonprofits to learn about their needs, in terms of interior space and layout; compliance with city regulations (she helped write an ordinance that legalized the pop-ups); and how to best take advantage of outdoor space.

Originally introduced in 2015, the project has continually been refined over time; Boombox offers design services for businesses, in addition to managing and leasing the spaces. Darnstadt sees an even bigger future for these structures now, when businesses seek new ways to deliver goods and services in neutral locations, and buyers are wary of shopping indoors. With budgets tighter all around, there’s great need for multi-functional small space and points-of-service hubs in communities.

“We fell into a common trap, thinking that we had a representative sample after a few interviews, and later found that there were so many organizations that felt left out, that couldn’t afford good design,” she says. “You need to constantly evolve to make the project work.”

Buildings that reflect community need and engagement can also bolster local economies via community labor and business collaboration. Patricia Gruits, director with the Boston and Rwanda-based nonprofit [MASS Design Group](#), says their design process always looks at ways to tap into local materials, labor, skills, and ingenuity. The firm has extensive experience working in Rwanda and other developing nations—work that has been informed by a core framework of collaboration as a way to improve the value and impact of a project. Gruits points to a number of decisions made in past projects—for the [Butaro District Hospital](#) in Rwanda, built in 2011, hiring local laborers instead of bringing in a bulldozer cost the same amount of money and provided local jobs; and relying on locally found or reclaimed material, from volcanic stone in Rwanda (used on the Butaro project) to beetle-killed pine in the U.S. (used during a proposed 2015 dorm project for Colorado College), help support local business and industry.

A Neighborhood History Lesson

The added value of tapping into community skills and vision can take many

different forms. In Los Angeles, another chapter of OAC has spent the last two years designing a renovation of the [Avalon](#) Carver Community Center. According to Sarah Loy, a member of the LA chapter of OAC, the first six months were a neighborhood history lesson, gleaned from extensive community conversations and interviews, aided by Jamivo Elder, the director of the community center. Built in the '50s after being championed by local activist and civil rights leader Mary B. Henry, who helped found the Head Start program, the building has always been a progressive nexus for the South Central neighborhood. Loy and her collaborators sought to infuse that history with the neighborhood's new vision for its future (a colorful new mural on the building's exterior recalls woven fabric, a nod to Henry's vision for a space that weaves together the neighborhood). The pending final design now includes a music production space for local artists and students, low-income housing, a STEM learning center, and a shelter for transitional youth.

"Typically, projects like this involve communities working directly with a contractor, which means they don't have designers who can translate community vision into something concrete," says Loy. "In this case, we can step in and really help them define their new space and environment, and by listening, we can help shape their voice."

That may be the core lesson to deploy when working with communities in need; don't just assist or aggregate ideas, amplify their experiences.

"We have a role to play, and it's not that we're all powerful, it's that we're complicit in either healing or harm," Ogbu says. "This is a point where we might radically change how we practice."

Stevenson, of Chicago OAC, says that he sees the community-led design process as akin to running a church, something he did while growing up. He wants his designs to be something that people interact with, because there's shared ownership and vision. It's hard to build the relationships needed to accomplish that over a small period of time.

"We're not going to show up for 24 hours [and then leave]," he says. "You need to be embedded enough to care whether the solution works or not. I approach outreach by thinking, 'I would like our grandchildren to be solving problems together.'"

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