Profiting from Design: Brooklyn's Center for Urban Pedagogy

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According to the US Internal Revenue Service, in order for an organization to quality for a 501(c)(3) tax exemption, it "must not be organized or operated for the benefit of private interests, and no part of [the] organization's net earnings may inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual." (IRS, 2012) More commonly described by the adjectives "not-for-profit," "nonprofit," or "charitable," U.S. companies set up under this rubric benefit from tax-deductible donations by promising, among other things, to direct any monetary gains from their work directly back into the company's mission. Ideally, this model loosens the strict grasp of the market, and situates the organization in a more neutral 'third' sector that is neither a publicly funded service, beholden to the taxpayer, nor a privately motivated business, beholden to the shareholder. Instead, in this third option represented by the not-for-profit organization, "success" is determined simply by solvency and adherence to the mission. Period.

The Brooklyn, New York–based Center for Urban Pedagogy is just such an organization. CUP's mission places art and design front-and-center, as a team-leader of sorts, in a variety of partnerships that are aimed at making complicated urban policies more understandable to the various players' constituents, in order that those constituents might then become more effectively engaged with the making

and management of those policies, and ultimately effect positive change from within. In the words of Communications Coordinator Sam Holleran, CUP "grounds design in the real world" by adhering to a relatively simple structure for their projects (Portal, 2012). Always starting with a community-based advocacy organization, a complex issue in need of clarification is identified. This group then works with an artist who helps to coordinate a designed response to the problem at hand, together with those who know the most about it. CUP is always the third partner in the mix, working to ensure that the end result will indeed be accessible to those people who are most in need of clarity on the matter. In addition to its nonprofit status, this partnership structure is an important and unique quality of CUP. Being made full partners, and not merely service-for-hire, is something that most designers might not be used to in team projects, particularly those of explicit social concern.

That is, except for architects. For a discipline that generally prides itself on being "grounded in the real world" while still inspiring change, CUP's model is worth exploring. A not-for-profit architecture is somehow both a natural concept and an oxymoron. Architecture always seeks to change the lives of its users for the better, to provide access to new and innovative perspectives on old problems. Yet in the process of solving these problems, financial and material

constraints squeeze the budget and the vision, and compromise is inevitable. Indeed, it's often the ability to navigate this ever-present rift that is lauded as a worthwhile architect's main quality. Nevertheless, careers rise and fall based almost entirely on the viability and efficiency of a working method, not its ability to change lives.

To be clear, in this discussion profit is meant as the extra income or "prize money" for a job-well-done. Covering costs is something that nonprofit organizations and architecture firms alike must manage, and rightly so. The fact is simply that the extra effort required to find financial flexibility in a structure that is built to avoid "extra" all together makes it much less desirable for anyone starting to work when compared to a system where built-in, adjustable profit margins benefit not only the business but also those who run it. And, as Chileans know all too well, privatized educational structures that ensure indebtedness only exacerbate these entrenched profit-driven foundations, which ultimately, and unfortunately, define Architecture as we know it. So what might CUP teach the discipline, both in terms of the projects it is able to tackle and the way it situates its practice within a diverse field of professions, all while maintaining an unwavering focus on design?

COMMUNITIES OF EDUCATION

"Making Policy Public" (MPP), one of CUP's most well-known and longest-running Community Education programs, is especially helpful for illuminating some of the organization's core values—against which their success as a nonprofit is determined. Once a year, CUP puts out a call to advocacy groups working on complex issues of public policy for which the "public" nature is much more evident in the policy's effects than in its development and management. A jury of design and policy professionals selects four projects, and subsequently a call is put out for designers interested in collaborating on the proposed projects. The winning team, also selected by the jury, then develops a fold-out poster that can be used by the advocacy organization to directly inform its constituents of the inner-workings of the policy (Images 1a, 1b). Beyond clarity, the ultimate goal with "Making Policy Public," as with all other CUP programs, is that these teaching tools not only facilitate enhanced knowledge of the policies at hand, but that the people directly affected by those policies might become engaged in their development and shape change in a way that was previously blocked by a simple lack of understanding and a proliferation of red tape. Some of the policies that have been made public in this way include the New York City Juvenile Justice System, regulations placed on city street vendors, and processes of loan distribution for predatory real estate developers—an unfortunately common problem in the United States.

Under a similar rubric as "Making Policy Public," but with a broader set of outcomes, the "Envisioning Development" program links designers with CUP, in consultation with policy experts and community leaders, to create multimedia teaching tools that organizers can use in workshops with community members. The principal difference here, besides the outcome of a "toolkit" of varying media in place of a single poster, is that the topics being analyzed are explicitly related to urban development and land use (Image 2). The toolkit for "What is Affordable Housing?" includes a small guide, a large chart for presentations, and an interactive, online map (CUP, 2012). It's expected that there will be a similarly tailored set of tools for the forthcoming "Envisioning Development" projects related to NYC zoning regulations and public processes for managing land use reassessment. Another Community Education program, "Public Access Design," continues down this path, also resulting in multimedia outcomes, but with a much more limited schedule than "Envisioning Development."

In addition to these Community Education programs, which all involve a local advocacy group, CUP also runs a series of Youth Education programs that partner with schools and engage directly with students, asking them to do the research required to elucidate an urban issue that impacts their particular community. In this model, the "teaching artist" now has the responsibility of collaborative instruction added to his/her foundational role as designer. "Urban Investigations" is a semester-long program, and "City Studies" is a shorter version that might take place in an after-school setting or even in a limited number of classroom sessions (Image 3). Students in these programs have taken on issues as focused as "Who decides where a grocery store goes?" and as ambitious as "Who owns the internet?"

FEEDBACK LOOPS

With so many issues at stake, so many players involved, and profit removed as a possible metric, finding quantifiable ways to measure success is a challenge in the CUP model. In the Youth Education programs, entrance and exit interviews are conducted for teaching artists and students. For "Making Policy Public" and the other Community Education programs where possible, analyzing distribution of the teaching materials is seen as one way of registering impact. But CUP is aware that, of course, having a toolkit or poster in hand is not a true indication of actual engagement with the processes they're depicting. For the time being, codifying this kind of analysis is unnecessary for CUP, who acknowledge that assessment of end results, in line with their organization's stated goals, must often simply come from collaborating partners' reassurances.

In some ways it's fitting that CUP must rely on healthy feedback loops to measure their success, given that clarity of communication is the foundation for every project they undertake. However, articulating this success quantifiably is usually crucial for a nonprofit organization to stay afloat—as these numbers must fill the pages of grant applications and the slides of donor presentations. This is a common predicament in development (used here in the disciplinary sense, without its fundraising connotations), where problems whose solutions don't necessarily lend themselves to data-ridden reports must nevertheless be squeezed into that mold in order to justify further investment. The devastating irony is of course that

those reports end up shaping future manifestations of the programs, and eventually the proposed solutions have more to do with providing reportable "results" than they do with actually best-addressing the initial problem.

Much of the reason that CUP seems to have (so far) avoided this pitfall is presumably by constantly changing the body of partners with which it works. Every local advocacy group has a different set of operating principles and methods, every school different priorities and approaches. Also crucially, the designers change for each project, intentionally recalibrating perspectives, tendencies, and tone. The diverse professional backgrounds of the staff within CUP itself represents the variety of skills that are necessary at different stages and for different partners. Another reason might simply be its age. At the risk of paralyzing pessimism, the organization is only 15 years old, and these kinds of patterns take decades to develop. But, to CUP's credit, the fact that they've found a fresh disciplinary platform from which to work is a unique and commendable position. After all, CUP isn't exactly a design firm, nor a cultural institution, nor an advocacy group. If only architects could slip out of this kind of labeling as easily.

ARCHITECTURE WITH A CAPITAL A
So if CUP, in its ambiguous positioning between design firm and advocacy group, relies on its non-profit status for flexibility, what's an architecture firm do? Architects often rightly think of their role in similar terms to those describing CUP—functioning as an intermediary between stakeholders, using design to clarify, improve, and support certain

ways of living. And they might be able to attract clients by advertising their ability to fulfill this role skillfully and efficiently. Nevertheless, profit margins are what propel the work forward, and are ultimately the only numbers defining what's possible and what's not.

In the same vein as the results-oriented development project, one could even go so far as to say that a broad public might not recognize a work of Architecture as such if it didn't have the discrete clarity only afforded a neatly-packaged project, heavy on form (light on concept). For architects whose principal preoccupation is the bottom line (most of them), over time the feedback loop forces an architecture that's more concerned with this kind of legibility than with affective change. One mustn't, of course, discount projects of fantastical forms or traditional approaches simply for this reason, per se. But architects and non-architects alike should be asking how it is they define an Architectural approach as they simultaneously imagine the Architectural result. Re-envisioning the outmoded debate over form vs. function through a lens of motivation, market, and material, the rationale for Architecture and the legibility of its capital "A" are called into question.

But even if the legibility of what constitutes Architecture to a broad public could or should be up for debate, what constitutes survival for Architects isn't being questioned. It's a tried-and-true recipe for failure to simply demonize capitalism in broad terms, decrying greed and heralding unfairness while necessarily living within the systems in a way that not only breeds complicity but also engenders pessimism.

In our contemporary globalized communications milieu, forces of resistance are multiplied exponentially by overlapping markets and deeply vested interests. Dreaming isn't enough, though it's an important first step. Practicality is a must. Architects know about this struggle all too well.

For CUP, communication that renders transparent all processes at hand is the principal tool for their nascent success. Moreover, communication is valuable in CUP's processes not only because of its ability to clarify, but also because of its ability to educate and ultimately persuade. Before, during, and after each of their projects, communication is simultaneously the driving methodology, the goal, and the tool for measuring success. If Architecture and its variously entwined creators and users could somehow fold this kind of persuasive communication into not only their working methods but also their processes for project selection and evaluation; if they could somehow make the politics of Architecture public, then the content of that communication would invariably remain foregrounded. And one can only hope that, once under public discussion, this content, and not profit, would drag Architecture forward. ◼

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