Democratic Design in the Pacific Rim 1999
Habits of the Proactive Practitioner

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Mark Francis; Habits of the Proactive Practitioner

The need for community designers to be both participatory and visionary has been a core idea in recent discussions between community designers in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan (Hester and Kweskin 1999; Hsia 1999, Nishimura 1999). While there are clear cultural differences in case studies conducted in all three countries, there is a substantial body of participatory design and planning work that is visionary and proactive (Hester 1999b). In order to be more proactive, design professionals need to develop unique values or habits. These are fundamentally different from the client-serving skills typically taught in design schools today. This paper outlines some of these qualities as well as how we might restructure design education to better foster these habits.

Proactive Practice

I have suggested recently that proactive practice is a fundamentally different approach to professional practice than traditionally taught and practiced in design schools— one in which design professionals take a stronger visionary, problem-solving role (Francis 1999). The essential qualities that distinguish the proactive professional from his/her traditional counterparts are that the professional is visionary yet is committed to a participatory approach through which the community can modify or enlarge the vision as it participates (Hester 1999c). Utilizing skills in risk-taking, negotiation, and entrepreneurial enterprise, the proactive professional base his/her thoughts and actions on strong social and environmental values, employs advocacy as part of their approach and is skillful in implementation to make sure their vision is realized. They often employ sound research and analysis and are involved long-term—from a few years to the length of their careers—to realize a vision. Proactive practitioners are distinct from “activist” practitioners in that they do not act alone but on behalf of larger community and environmental interests. Table 1 outlines some differences between traditional and proactive practice.

There are both historic examples of designers who have worked in this tradition including Frederick Law Olmsted (Rybczynski 1999) and Jens Jensen (Grese 1992) in landscape architecture as well as many contemporary examples such as Lawrence

Halprin, Randy Hester and Charles Moore. Examples of proactive projects include city or regional open space planning, urban greening, community garden design, creek restoration, sustainable design, and projects concerned with economic or political empowerment.

1 American landscape architects working in this tradition include Mini Askew, Diana Balmori, Lisa Crowder, Chuck Flink, Susan Goltsman, Rich Haag, Randy Hester, Margarita Hill, Walter Hood, David Hulse, Daniel Iacofano, Stan Jones, Laura Lawson, Marcia McNally, Paul Morris, Patsy Eubanks Owens, Michael Rios, Tom Richman, Lee Weintraub, Daniel Winterbottom and Jenn Worth, to name just a few.
TABLE 1:
Some Differences between Traditional and Proactive Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Practice</th>
<th>Proactive Practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client-driven</td>
<td>Vision-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution-oriented</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for business and profit</td>
<td>Concern for social and environmental sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional responds to client’s request and need</td>
<td>Professional responds to community and/or environmental need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation done due to mandate</td>
<td>Participation done out of personal commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or requirement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on program provided by client</td>
<td>Research-based</td>
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Central Park and Davis Farmers Market
(Design: Mark Francis/CoDesign/MIG)

Cultures of Proactive Practice

There are four distinct areas or cultures of proactive practice: 1) the private visionary, 2) the public professional, 3) the professional with the non-profit, and 4) the proactive university. The private visionary works as part of a private, for-profit firm. The public professional is where the design professional works in public practice within a governmental agency. The professional with the non-profit works with a non-government (NGO) or not-for-profit organization. The proactive university is a design school, a university-based design center, or the studio of an individual design educator in which community-based education and practice

2 / Examples of visionary non-profit organizations that employ landscape architects include the Greenbelt Alliance, Trust for Public Land, American Forests, San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, American Farmland Trust and Urban Ecology
becomes the tool for community vision making. The remainder of this paper focuses on the core values needed to work in all four areas of proactive practice and suggests some educational reforms to better prepare students to enter these areas of emerging practice.

Habits of the Proactive Practitioner

There are at least seven core values, or what I will call “habits,” that the proactive practitioner needs to be successful in his/her work. While there are others such as negotiation, compassion and leadership, these are ones that I have found particularly important to maintain. I will discuss each briefly, then suggest how design education can be restructured to foster these habits in professional life.

   A hallmark of proactive practice is teamwork. The practitioner needs to know group process skills and be able to lead a structured participatory process. They also need to be able to work with a wide range of people including professionals and community residents of all ages. They must know how to work with non-professionals and have skills in group problem solving and design negotiation. Verbal and graphic skills are also critical.

2. Community.
   To be visionary, one needs to have a strong sense of community. Professionals need to understand how design and planning can contribute to a larger public good. Sensitivity to social and environmental justice is essential. An ability to sense how a design can contribute to community development is beneficial. Skills in social and cultural theory and analysis are helpful. It also requires an understanding of cultural and political diversity.

   This form of practice frequently requires the professional to speak up for what they believe in. Because this goes against much of the training that prepares designers to be facilitators rather than advocates, one result is that environmental designers tend to be more passive and quiet. Vision-based participation can often be a lonely process where one may be a single voice until others speak up and get involved. Leadership is therefore a necessary skill.

4. Entrepreneurship.
   Participation requires an ability to make things happen. It often involves risk-taking and presenting a strong point of view. It also involves skills in management and business. As proactive practice often begins with the professional’s interest in an issue or problem and not by a paying client, personal motivation is critical to
success. Also needed is an ability to sustain oneself emotionally and financially over the long term.

5. Persistence.

Proactive practice frequently requires an ability to be patient and persistent. Many visions take years or even entire careers to realize. They may also involve many defeats and setbacks before ideas are accepted and implemented. Professionals may need to make a commitment to projects that begins well before and extend well beyond the paying client.

6. Persuasion.

Verbal, written, and graphic expression is critical to proactive practice. The ability to develop ideas with users through techniques such as participatory graphics is helpful. Professionals may also need to get involved in the public arena, such as writing letters to the local paper, speaking up at major events, volunteering for commissions and committees or even running for public office.

7. Reflection.

The planner Donald Schon (1983) has suggested that reflection is essential to professional life. Reflection requires an ability to adjust one's thinking over time while keeping a coherent vision. To be successful, good research skills are critical. There are now well-established techniques for research and social science-based participatory design (Hester 1990) and post design evaluation (Zeisel 1984). These include methods for listening, observing, and recording ideas. Other reflective qualities include tolerance of multiple viewpoints, use of common sense, and good humor. Critical thinking is also needed when action is guided by theory (Cashdan et. al. 1979).

Davis Greenway/Aspen Greenbelt designed as naturalistic landscape (Design: Mark Francis/CoDesign/MIG)

\[3\] One model of professional sustainability is to do a number of traditional projects in order to support more non-paying or pro bono work. I am convinced, however, that it possible to fully support oneself as a full time proactive practitioner.
(Re)forming Design Education

Today most schools of architecture, landscape architecture, planning, and urban design are structured around the traditional model of client-driven practice. Few academic programs prepare students to be visionary in both thought and action. While we have developed sophisticated methods of participatory design (Hester 1990), landscape educators have been slow to reform design education to adequately prepare students to enter proactive practice. This emerging form of practice requires a fundamental change in design education (McNally 1999; Schon 1990).

Recent critiques of design education, such as the influential 1996 Boyer Report on architectural education (Boyer and Mitgang 1996), point out the danger of continuing to train design students without instilling a concern for larger social issues. "What seems missing, we believe, is a sense of common purpose connecting the practice of architecture to the most consequential issues of society," the Boyer Report says. It proposes a "medical school" model of design education in which service-providing professional offices are established within design schools to provide internship and training for design students.

Knowledge and experience for proactive practice can be obtained in several ways:
- Community-based design studios
- Expanded elective and required courses
- Community service through community design centers or individual projects
- Internships with private, public, or non profit organizations
- Mentoring
- Direct activism

To develop skills in proactive practice, students will need to take more courses outside the normal boundaries of design education. These may include courses in criticism and design journalism, risk-taking, negotiation, politics, cultural diversity, entrepreneurial management, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Given that most design curricula do not have room for additional requirements, some traditional requirements must give way. The traditional studio sequence will need to include more community service and visionary making. Studios can be restructured to develop advocacy skills. Just as professional education in law or medical is structured to replicate real world situations, design studios could be organized to simulate situations of debate and advocacy. Also more required reading, reflective seminars, interactions with people in everyday community settings, and field courses can help inform the future proactive designer.

Some of this knowledge is available in other disciplines taught at universities. Studio settings involved in proactive projects are another avenue for knowledge. Additional skills can be gained by working in internships or community service. Some
students can obtain this experience through direct social or environmental activism within and outside the university. As is happening at some schools already, community-based service can be a requirement for graduation and the profession could test for these skills as part of their requirements for licensing. To meet the need for retraining, existing professionals interested in becoming more full engaged professionals, continuing education or mentoring in proactive practice is needed.

The problem with learning these skills is that they are both challenging to learn and often difficult to teach. It may require changing required and elective courses in environmental design or altering how we teach design and planning utilizing more case study or problem-based courses. Table 2 suggests ways that required skills may be obtained within university environments or through real world experience.

Community design centers can sometimes play a useful role. Many schools of landscape architecture, architecture, and planning both in the U.S. and abroad have established community design centers, which provide design services to low-income communities. They emerged historically from the advocacy planning tradition that encouraged professionals, faculty, and students to pursue socially and environmentally responsible projects in their community or region (Hester 1999b).

<table>
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<th>TABLE 2: Curriculum/Experience to Support Proactive Practice</th>
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<tr>
<td>Habits</td>
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| 1. Collaboration | Organizational development  
Group process  
Participatory methods  
Programming  
Rhetoric and communication  
Negotiation/conflict management |
| 2. Community | Community development  
Urban sociology/anthropology  
Social change  
Environmental/community psychology |
| 3. Courage | History  
Political activism  
Leadership |
| 4. Entrepreneurship | Business  
Economic analysis |
| 5. Persistence | Futurism  
Risk taking  
Sustainability  
Political process  
Policy analysis |
| 6. Persuasion | Group communication  
Public speaking  
Graphic design/communication/simulation  
Creative writing  
Journalism |
| 7. Reflection | Research methods  
Behavioral methods  
Post occupancy evaluation (POE)  
Case study analysis/methods  
Environmental autobiography |
Proactive practice often involves creative design for play
(Design: Baile Oakes)

The Fully Engaged Professional – Implications for Theory

In addition to improved training and skills, proactive professionals will need to make better use of theory. Theory can provide a framework by which to judge the success of practice as well as to guide professionals in picking the right visions and battles. However, professionals need to use theory differently than commonly employed today in most design professions. Rather than the designer’s typical use of theory in which distinct and often divergent theories are used in projects (such as art, culture or ecology), proactive practice requires an integrated theory-based practice that combines approaches and perspectives. Only through an integration of thought, idea, and action can community designers shape and direct the world in meaningful ways.
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References


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