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Proactive

Visionary Thought and Participatory Action in Environmental Design

Practice:

Community participation in design and planning had its beginnings in the advocacy planning movement of the 1960s. Its promise was that by involving and empowering citizens, planning and design would become more socially and environmentally responsible. While community participation has become firmly institutionalized, it also has become more of a tool for defending exclusionary, conservative principles than for promoting social justice and ecological vision.

Participatory design charrette for Davis' Central Park, held in the park.

Photos and graphics:
Mark Francis/CoDesign

Above: **Farmers market, Central Park, Davis.**
Below: **Plan for the Davis Greenway.**

The problem lies not in the concept of participation but in the roles that designers and planners have taken in relationship to their clients and projects. The traditional culture of professional practice can be characterized as client serving rather than vision making, based on the premise that clients come to a designer seeking professional assistance.

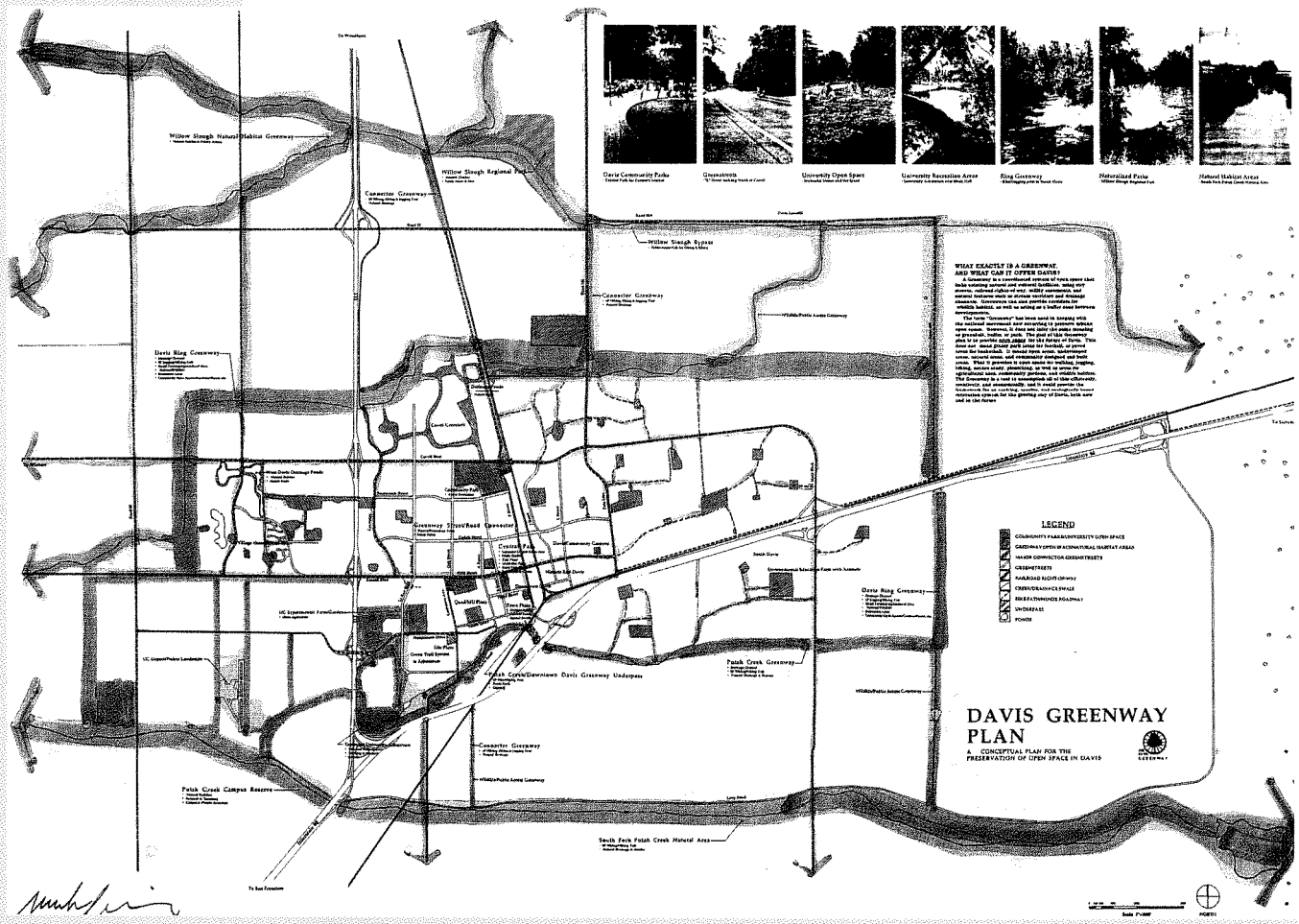
Firms propose, then negotiate, a scope of services with their clients. The boundaries and problems are narrowly defined to avoid conflict and make channels of control clear. Participation is usually done to satisfy mandated requirements and is not intended to fully engage the community. In this process, the professional is an advocate for the client, whether public or private, and the relationship is restricted by the culture of practice, contract law and concerns with liability.

The problem with this approach is that usually the client comes to the designer or planner with a solution, not a problem. The charge to the professional is to give form to the client's preconceived solution, and the visionary hands of the professional are often tied. For example, a client may want a design for a park or plaza, but does not ask the professional to spend time defining the problem or exploring whether theirs is really the best solution for the problem. Research may reveal that a garden would address the community's needs better than a formal park would, but the designer is unable to explore alternatives beyond the narrow scope predetermined by the client. Professionals may involve the community, as they are often required to do, but their allegiance remains firmly with the paying client.

Proactive Practice

I propose a fundamentally different approach to professional practice than traditionally taught and practiced in environmental design, one in which design professionals take a stronger visionary, problem-solving role. Proactive professionals can be distinguished from their traditional counterparts by their visionary approach and their commitment to a participatory process through which the community can modify or enlarge the vision.

Proactive professionals use skills in risk-taking, negotiation and entrepreneurial enterprise, base their thoughts and actions on strong social and environmen-



tal values, employ advocacy as part of their approach and are 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 practice has a long precedence in the history of environmental design, with many advances in design theory and planning practice coming from proactive practitioners. Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of modern landscape architecture, was a proactive practitioner of great vision and strong will. Olmsted, in the design of New York City's Central Park as well as many of his later public works, pursued a vision of addressing broad social and environmental problems. He and other landscape architects following him, such as Jens Jensen, Ian McHarg, Larry Halprin and Rich Haag, expanded not only the boundaries of their profession but also the way society looks at the possibilities of urban life.

CoDesign, the firm my colleagues and I started in 1984, is an example of a proactive practice. We named it CoDesign based on our conviction that design should be collaborative, cooperative and ultimately build community. We have always tried to be proactive in putting forth visions of the community and environment that becomes a framework to others to follow.[1] For example, in 1987 we put together a proposal for an integrated regional open space system called the Davis Greenway. We started informally one evening over a few beers, sketching on layers of trace laid over aerial photos. No one asked or paid us to do this, but we felt it was a missing element in the planning for Davis's future.[2]

We presented the greenway concept in environmental forums and refined it in participatory planning workshops. The idea caught on and ultimately became the open space element of the city's general plan. Our proactive effort established a clear vision of the future that generated substantial community involvement and developed an ongoing open space constituency.

Proactive practice is taking place today at a range of scales, from homes and gardens to cities and regions. Projects that lend themselves particularly well to proactive practice include community gardens, regional planning efforts, citywide open spaces systems, new forms of transportation, urban infill and sustainable development. Even "middle places," new public places such as neighborhood meeting places

and outdoor hang-outs that are neither parks or plazas but are becoming important settings for public life, can be a focus of proactive practice.[3]

Cultures of Proactive Practice

Designers and planners are becoming increasingly engaged in proactive practice through in a variety private, public and academic settings. Some professionals may combine several of these approaches in their practice.

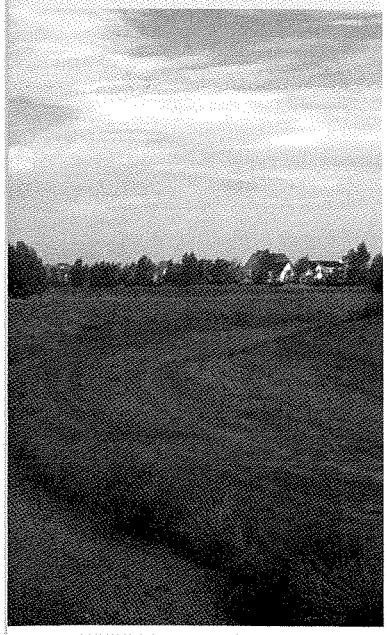
The private visionary. Most proactive practitioners work as part of a private, for-profit firm. It may be a one-person office or a team of professionals, often from several disciplines, working toward a common vision. The private proactive practice is often underfunded and may not be highly profitable for the professional.

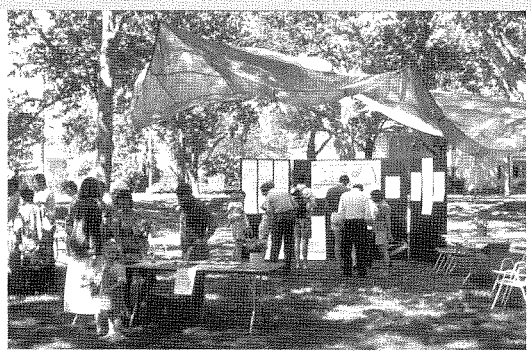
That is not to say proactive work is necessarily pro bono work. I estimate that our greenway concept in Davis led to more than $750,000 in paid work for planning and landscape architecture firms, which were hired to examine and implement its details. Very little of this work went to our firm, but the effort allowed us to develop expertise in this area of practice and we have since been hired as paid consultants to do similar plans for other communities.[4]

These professionals not only contribute to improving their local environment but help to create more sustainable communities or regions. Over time, as their visions take hold, they can expect recognition and support for their efforts, often in other settings or communities. Offices that have successfully adopted proactive practice as a central focus of their firms are presented elsewhere in this issue.

Another kind of private visionary is one whose proactive work involves one project over a long period of time as a labor of love. Randy Hester has characterized these as "labors of love in the public landscape."[5] These are often lifetime projects that serve as the

Below and right: **The Davis Greenway protects open and agricultural space at the edge of suburban development.**





Left: **Author takes part in the design workshop.**
Right: **Participatory design process for Central Park in Davis.**

central focus or crowning achievement of ones professional career. This may be a single project, such as Gas Works Park in Seattle, or a combination of linked projects throughout a region, such as the Los Angeles Greenway.

My labor of love project has been the expansion and design of Central Park in Davis, which has taken more than fourteen years of my proactive professional involvement and is still not complete. It began as a modest studio project where I had students conduct a community survey and develop alternative designs for expanding the historic central park in the small college community I work and live in. A community group called Save Open Space (SOS) picked up on the idea and passed a voter referendum to defeat a proposed shopping mall to create the expanded park.

I was hired by the City of Davis in 1987 to develop a master plan and park design with extensive community involvement and a diverse program consisting of a permanent covered pavilion and market plaza for the popular Davis Farmer's Market, a public garden, a teen center, a cafe, a children's play area, a central lawn area, and a participatory children's fountain. The park today is the community's favorite public space and the project has become a community success story.

Most all design visionaries are proactive practitioners. It is important to distinguish among visionary, entrepreneurial designers who are focused primarily on a social, ecological vision, those who are focused primarily on the success of their practice, and those who place form and style above larger cultural or environmental concerns.

The public professional. This form of proactive practice typically takes place within public agencies. There is a long list of agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Forest Service, state agriculture and natural resources agencies, and local planning and community development departments, that are becoming involved in strong advocacy and visionary projects. It is often more difficult to be a proactive public professional than a private proactive professional, as the political agenda guiding public practice restricts both vision and action.

The professional with the nonprofit. Today many design professionals are working proactively with national, regional or local nonprofit organizations involved with environmental issues, community development, social issues, housing or other matters. They work as volunteers, employees or paid consultants on a vast range of projects — from recycling to creek restoration to community forests.

The dynamics that professionals working in nonprofit environments experience is often different from those that their public- and private-sector counterparts face. They, too, are often restricted by the agenda of the organization they work for but often have greater room to advance visions actively promote them over the long term.

The activist university. This form of practice may involve a center, institute, a department or, in rare cases, an entire school or college. It is where the academic mission of research, teaching and service is used to make positive change in the community and environment. An example of this is the University of Virginia's School of Architecture and Planning, which recently shifted its focus from historic preservation and high-style design to sustainable design at both the local and international level.

Many schools have established community design centers, which provide design services to low-income communities. They come from the advocacy planning tradition, allowing faculty and students to pursue visionary and socially and environmentally responsible projects in their community or region. Design schools have also begun to create professional offices, which provide an ideal setting for faculty and students

to do proactive projects in communities. They are different from community design centers in that the internships are fully integrated into the required design curriculum. The value of this setting and experience for the young design student is that it exposes them to what proactive practice can be like.

Another type of practice involves the academic visionary, the single faculty member, who focuses on one or more central issues through creative research. Design schools tend to provide an excellent setting for this kind of activist, given that the faculty member's risk taking is sheltered by tenure and a regular paycheck.

Implications for Design Education

Today most schools of architecture, landscape architecture, planning and urban design are structured around the traditional model of client-driven practice. Few prepare students to be visionary in both thinking and action. This emerging form of practice requires a fundamental change in design education.

Recent critiques of design education, such as the influential 1996 Boyer Report, point out the danger of continuing to train design students without inculcating 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 report says. It proposes a medical school model of design education, where service-providing professional offices would be established within design schools to provide internship and training for design students.[7]

To develop skills in proactive practice, students will need to take more courses outside the normal boundaries of design education. These include criticism and design journalism, risk taking, negotiation, politics, cultural diversity, entrepreneurial management and leading cross disciplinary teams. 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 give way for more community-based, visionary projects. More required reading, reflective seminars, interactions with people in everyday community settings and field courses can help inform the future proactive designer.

Effective visionary action requires a unique blend of training, values, determination, persistence and risk taking. Proactive practice begins well before there is a paying client and continues long after the contract ends. Implementing the vision can often takes years and even the full lifetime of the practitioner. Yet proactive practice can be a rewarding form of professional life that addresses the essential purpose of environmental design — to leave the world a better place than we find it.

Notes

1. Architect James Zanetto and I originally founded this firm in 1984. It was soon joined by U.C. Davis faculty colleagues Kerry Dawson and Rob Thayer. Dawson left in 1993 to be dean of the University of Georgia's School of Environmental Design and Zanetto left to form his own architectural practice; landscape architect Skip Mezger joined in 1993. CoDesign has since focused largely on socially and ecologically responsible landscape architecture and community design.

2. I developed the first drawing of the Davis Greenway Plan as part of my contribution to the citizen advisory committee I sat on for Davis's general plan update. I later asked my colleague Kerry Dawson (who was also Director of the University Arboretum) to expand and refine the idea with help from Stan Jones, one of our students. Jones (who now teaches at the University of Oregon) developed the full plan as his thesis project and addressed many of the tough implementation issues we avoided in developing our early concepts.

3. Mark Francis, "The Middle Place: Rethinking Place and Space in American Public Life." Unpublished plenary paper presented at the Environmental Design Research Association Conference, Salt Lake City (15 June, 1996).

4. This is a common problem of being an advocate in your own back yard. Local politicians and staff often find they must bring in experts from outside the community to verify and legitimate ideas advanced by local professionals.

5. Randolph T. Hester, Jr., "Labors of Love in the Public Landscape," *Places* 1:1 (1983), 18-27.

6. C. E. Beveridge, P. Rocheleau and D. Larkin, *Frederick Law Olmsted : Designing the American Landscape* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995).

7. E. L. Boyer and L. D. Mitgang, *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice* (Princeton: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1996).