APPARATUS X:
ACTIVATING THE ARCHITECTURAL ACTIVIST

A Thesis in
Architecture
by Aaron Wertman

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Abstract

Activism has been tied to architecture in the modern era since the socio-political upheaval of the 1960s. Today, the itinerant activist architect has emerged as an alternative to office-bound practice. Typically defined as one who uses design as a tool for political change, immediate response, and/or in reaction to man-made or natural catastrophe, an activist architect can be more simply described as one who takes architectural practice with him/her, commits to a community, and engages with that community’s building needs. While it is still essential for the activist architect to possess formal design skills, knowledge of design process and craft, be well practiced in communicating ideas, and to promote ethics, safety, and responsibility, they must also cultivate knowledge and skills gained through informal experience – immersion in community, collaborative communication, thriftiness and inventiveness, trust-building. What, in addition to building, drawing, design, craft knowledge, and experience, enables the activist arch to engage in a meaningful way? The activist architect must be a facilitator, enhancing the inherent desire in every community to create a built environment reflective of their values and needs.

Despite the rise of student interest in humanitarianism and social consciousness, and the profession’s promotion and commendations of the “citizen architect,” the formal curriculum of today’s architectural education system (NAAB-centric) does little to educate or prepare students to be activists. If the activist architect is created through the combination of informal experience, immersion, compassion, sympathy, understanding, holistic thinking, proper application of skills, resourcefulness, politics, and formal training, how does one prepare for those things educationally? Furthermore, how does formal and informal knowledge, professional training, and experience get to communities in need in order to facilitate change?
Apparatus X, the design/build project informed by this thesis, is both an educational preparation and a response to the needs of an itinerant activist architect. It is a self-sufficient, mobile design/construction studio designed to serve the essentials of architectural activism – responsiveness, tools/knowledge transmission, and the establishment of relationships where knowledge sharing, design-as-dialog, and community engagement occur. This unit becomes part of the community, placing the activist architect exactly where they need to be in order to commune with their neighbors and collaborators. By empowering the autonomous re-development of a community through self-active architectural activism, the rebuilding process and the architect’s role changes. It evolves from that of a removed designer to an engaged activist and community member.

Three physical spaces designed into the mobile unit are critical to facilitating re-building efforts: tooling workshop, design studio, and relatable space open to public. In these spaces within the mobile unit, tangible and intangible deliverables are brought into the community: tools, knowledge, and empowerment through reciprocal re-building. With a prepared physical presence, the activist architect and his/her community can engage in design activities and tasks together – WITH the community rather than FOR the community. In this way, there is reciprocity in learning that provides local knowledge and direct feedback to the activist architect, creating an environment of effective design and engagement for the betterment of communities and individuals in need.

For me, as a student of architecture and a person who has been involved in community re-building, Apparatus X is a tool of anticipation – a tool designed for engagement; a tool prepared to address unknown factors that shape re-building efforts – and so I go forth, armed with this physical manifestation of architectural activism, prepared to facilitate change.
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INTRODUCTION

The profession of architecture has a long history of advocating for the architect’s participation in civil discourse, public interest architecture, and activism. The architect has the ability to contribute meaningfully to complex situations of the modern world regarding housing disparity, changing building paradigms, and limited resource availability through design thinking and creative works, but such activity is often considered marginal within the field of architecture. As design-build and community outreach have expanded the profession toward the realm of complexity, ‘fuzzy logic’, informal settlements, and new types of urban morphologies (Sinha, 2012), architects have drifted away from the office environment into academia, the Fine Arts, woodworking, fabrication, and other crafts as means of realizing the full value of their design thinking beyond the boundaries somewhat arbitrarily\(^1\) set by the profession.

While advocating for community engagement, within the profession there is actually a limited amount of support, politically, financially, and educationally, and structurally for the work of the activist architect. Thomas Fisher in *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, recognizes the growing practice of community design and public-interest architecture, but emphasizes that change and re-education in the profession must come first. He calls for support for such action by promoting the professional, political, and academic development of a public-interest architecture program.

In response to the call for support of a marginalized, but impactful practice of architectural design in areas of desperate need, this thesis defines an architectural activism that is tied to direct community

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\(^1\) Not really arbitrarily… market forces – money, clients, power – became the driving forces of the profession which subversively created a framework and a specific way of working that catered to those needs and became the norm.
Fig. 0.1  Apparatus X is an expandable unit, designed to enable engagement with the community through building and design.
engagement and reciprocal design - and proposes a multi-function tool/workshop/office designed specifically to activate the activist.

Apparatus X is a self-sufficient unit that acts as an adaptable tool trailer, mobile design studio, and micro living unit designed to take architectural activism to people who need help in rebuilding after conflict, natural disasters, or catastrophic failures in infrastructures that support housing (such as financial, or governmental). It is a project that is not just about design-build, but social engagement and action. Composed of live space, work space, and flexible communal space, Apparatus X provides a forum for community voice and the exchange of design thinking\(^2\). Through an embedded physical presence in the community, it makes the architect, and the profession of architecture, directly accessible to those who need architecture’s skills, knowledge and sensibilities, rather than relegating community engagement to a removed position. With a prepared physical presence, the activist architect can engage in design activities and tasks WITH the community rather FOR the community. In this way, there is reciprocity in learning, designing, and building that provides local knowledge and direct feedback to the activist architect, creating an environment of effective design and engagement for the betterment of communities and individuals in need. Apparatus X and the type of engagement it supports are not simply about participatory design, but rather responding to the needs of an individual on both a temporal and a metaphysical level. At the core of Apparatus X lie the principles of education through experience, tooling and building as empowerment, and an attitude of self-progressive community activism.

Growing up in a large Catholic family I learned and experienced from a young age the value of service and relationships in creating a positive and comfortable environment. Through service trips designed to re-build and improve quality of life through home maintenance, construction intervention, and relationship building, with the Catholic Heart WorkCamp

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\(^2\) Included in the flexible communal space is the “porch.” In addition to the reciprocity of design thinking and collective knowledge, this space acts as the place of informal conversation, having a beer, and building relationships. This is a place that blends professional accessibility, design thinking, and building experience with action, relationships, and a comfortable environment all of which are built upon building and design.
(which began in high school and continued through college), I became accustomed to being involved in community dialog and personal connections that brought together a variety of skills and voices to address a common cause for positive change. With the addition of the formal skills that I learned through an accredited degree program in architecture, my value as a design thinker/builder in the community was amplified. This experience led to my B.Arch thesis; aiming to shape an innovative and effective method to rebuild as well as educate communities and to promote an active and self-progressive attitude in economically struggling areas. The education-through-experience process acted as a critique of architectural education, implemented the radical reuse of materials, and emphasized a relationship between materials & tools, drawing & building, and the user & the architect. The outcome of this B.Arch. thesis produced the vision of a guild/open workshop/homebuilding facility in the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans and a 25 year narrative plan to guide me in pursuing this vision. The design and construction of Apparatus X continues into year 3 of this 25 year plan.

**Fig. 0.2**
Hurricane Katrina affected thousands of lives in 2005 and the residual effects continue today as evidenced by this New York Times article on February 21st, 2013.

**Fig. 0.3** Final presentation of the B.Arch. thesis titled Architecture as a Catalyst for Self-Progressivism: A Constructive Environment in the Lower Ninth Ward
In order to contextualize Apparatus X and to place this work within the architectural discourse relating to an architecture of change³, we must responsibly 1) define architectural activism by exploring existing programs and related definitions from within the profession, 2) look at work and examples set by our activist architect forefathers that inform from beyond the profession and learn from them, 3) re-define the activist architect by introducing intangible factors and influences and place the work of the activist in a context/field/environment that is conductive to effective engagement through an activist architectural strategy, 4) build a relationship between activism, the multiple roles of the activist, and the tools and methods of activism, and manifest the definition of architectural activism through a proposal for a tool/workshop/office, Apparatus X, as something that not only mobilizes the architect, but also embeds them in a community and then supports the dialog between the architect and the community.

³ The book *The Architecture of Change: Building a Better World*, published in 2013, is a collection of articles from *DESIGNER/builder* magazine that focused on linking form and equity, delinking architecture and privilege, and self-empowerment through sophisticated building that can (and was) produced outside the professionalized system of architecture.
CHAPTER ONE

Defining Activism in an Architectural Context: The Existing Discourse from within the Profession

What is an Activist Architect?
How Does the Establishment Define an Activist Architect?

The term “activist architect” is not explicitly defined in the profession, but many related terms and titles with similar perspective and goals do exist. In order to understand activism in an architectural context, and to define the activist architect, further exploration existing definitions and precedents that are supported by the Architectural establishment is necessary.
"You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I'm sure this does not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and complete irrelevance."

Keynote Lecture at AIA National Convention, Whitney Young, civil rights leader, 1968

Fig. 1.1 Whitney Young, a prominent civil rights leader, delivered a powerful and provocative statement to architects during the Keynote Lecture at the 1968 AIA National Convention.
1.1 Existing Roles and Definitions

In 1968, Whitney Young, a prominent civil rights leader and keynote speaker at the AIA National Convention, delivered a blistering critique to the profession to attending architects, prompting an introspective look at engagement within the profession of architecture. Young stated, “You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights, and I’m sure this does not come to you as any shock. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and complete irrelevance.” In reaction, architects began to question the impact of the profession in the realm of community design and engagement. As architectural activism began to develop post ‘68, the profession advocated roles such as the “public interest architect” and the “citizen architect”, for both outreach and meaningful community engagement, and as positive reflections on the profession as a whole.

With the world becoming smaller through technological accessibility and global information sharing, but more chaotic and complex, activist work in this realm of architectural engagement has been further defined. In her book *Architecture for Rapid Change and Scarce Resources*, Sumita Sinha coined the term development activist. By exploring the development activist and established roles and terms, and recognizing shortcomings and key factors that enable effective engagement, we can shape the definition of the activist architect as a valuable contributor to the continuous evolution of the profession.

THE PUBLIC-INTEREST ARCHITECT

Public-interest design focuses on public service work and aims to reach a wider audience of potential clients while addressing social inequalities. It emphasizes the “triple bottom line” – addressing ecological, economic, and social issues related to architectural works. As a direct response to Whitney Young’s criticism, this area of architectural focus grew out of the
community design movement, which was characterized by the appearance of community design centers in many universities across the U.S., aimed at addressing issues such as affordable housing and co-design within their own neighborhoods. Community design centers peaked in the seventies, but the public-interest design movement was only just beginning. Design/Build programs also began to appear as a strategy to engage with communities and extend the scope of architecture beyond the office-like classroom. One of the most publicized Design/Build programs, Auburn University’s Rural Studio, was founded in 1993 (more on Samuel Mockbee and The Rural Studio in a later chapter).

Fig. 1.2 Design Corps advocates a Public Interest Architect that effectively engages in communities in need.

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4 Universities that still have community design centers: Catholic University of America, Cornell University, Florida Atlantic University, Hampton University, Iowa State University, Kent State University, Louisiana Tech University, Mississippi State University, Morgan State University, Penn State University, Pratt Institute, Rice University, Texas Tech University, Tulane University, Universidad De Puerto Rico, University of Arkansas, University of Houston, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Kentucky, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of Oregon, University of Pennsylvania, University of South Florida, University of Virginia, University of Washington, Washington University in St. Louis
In the book *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford attempt to capture the spirit of the public interest design movement through a collection of writings and documentation covering projects that have engaged communities in meaningful ways, including headings such as **PARTICIPATORY DESIGN**, **PUBLIC-INTEREST ARCHITECTURE**, and **HOUSING FOR THE 98%**. Through this collection of work, Bell helps to define the public-interest architect as **one who makes a career as an architect serving those who need the most help, is fully dedicated to public service work while still making a living, is engaged in their communities, is entrepreneurial, and applies design skills and architectural ideas to problems previously considered the exclusive domain of public health officials, environmentalists, and community activists.**

Further supported by the writing and teaching of Thomas Fisher, professor and dean of the College of Design at the University of Minnesota, public-interest design is needed and becomes increasingly relevant with the increase in global populations living in slums and requiring basic housing, sanitation, and security. Fisher suggests that the development of a career path in public interest architecture would positively address the growing needs for housing for those who can’t afford to pay for the services offered by an architect. “We need a career path, and possibly even profession, of public-interest architecture, parallel to public health\(^5\) and public defense, that has its own educational requirements, practice models, financial support, and client base” (Design As Activism, 2008).

\(^5\) Well known landscape architect and designer Frederick Law Olmstead greatly helped in the public-health movement, which eventually became the Red Cross. If we look at the power of the Red Cross, they are highly mobile and itinerant.
In 2008, the AIA Board of Directors passed the Citizen Architect Resolution. This document attempted to establish support and advocacy for civically engaged architects that “serve” their community. Through this document, the AIA commends engagement with local, state, and federal issues, gaining appointment to boards and commissions, and those who advocate for higher living standards, the creation of livable, sustainable communities, and the greater public good. They also state in the document that the AIA believes that these members should be actively supported at all levels of service.

“The Citizen Architect uses his/her insights, talents, training, and experience to contribute meaningfully, beyond self, to the improvement of the community and human condition.”
~AIA Citizen Architect, www.aia.org

The AIA Center for Civic Leadership acts as the profession’s forum to promote and connect Citizen Architects. Overall, this definition suggests civic activism though serving on boards and taking interest in representing “The People”, but does not define HOW a citizen architect can meaningfully impact a community in need.
In response to the criticism that the profession lacks social or civic contributions, the term “Citizen Architect” has a connection to political obligation through civic activism, serving on boards, and taking interest in representing “The People”, but despite the value of this advocacy, it is
still a removed stance of activism and engagement, one that conforms too neatly to the norms of office practice and professional routine without truly changing how architects engage. This term becomes another buzzword within the profession, one that provides empty value, acknowledges the good work of the few, and claims a positive movement as their own, standing on the shoulders of a few exemplary architects.
Isn’t the Citizen Architect, according to the AIA definition, something that all architects should aspire to?

THE DEVELOPMENT ACTIVIST

The Development Activist, according to Sumita Sinha, works in a world defined by rapid change and scarce resources, responding to a complex and chaotic world while making meaning of it and proposing solutions. In her book *Architecture for Scarce Resources and Rapid Change*, Sinha describes an architectural activism that requires *development skills, fundraising abilities, management skills, reciprocal design practices, itinerant practice, hyper-resourcefulness, self-motivation, and self-reliance*. The work of the development activist is inclusive of practices that are not only pertinent to the realm of architecture, but also include skills and knowledge from the realms of engineering, sociology, planning, economics, and beyond. It is a holistic and all-encompassing requirement of Development Activism that begins to pull the architect out of the traditional boundaries of the profession, and reshape architecture as practice, engagement, and even where architects/offices are located.

Roberta M. Feldman defines *Activist Practice* as “The act of architects leaving the office, engaging the community, and seeking a need for design in that community, rather than passively waiting for clients to come to them.” (*Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service through*

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6 Feldman calls them potential “clients”, which is accurate in describing the typical party with whom architects interact, but it does not seem appropriate here. I think we should call these people something else, like neighbor? friend?
Architecture). This notion can be explored through Sinha’s concentric circles of design analogy. The desk architect traditionally practices in the innermost circle – the safe place of “the office” with a few wealthy clients. The next circle contains development activists working in areas such as infrastructure, community projects or social housing and interacting with housing associations and local government bodies, but projects are managed in a tight sequence. The outermost fringe is the larger world of chaos and complexity – the area of ‘fuzzy logic’, of ‘soft’ information and data, of informal settlements, new types of urban morphologies such as the code-resistant megacity, of sustainable development, culture, etc. As the profession expands and evolves, architects continue to drift towards the fringe, but finds financial and political challenges to implementing and sustaining effective engagement practices.
1.2 Established Institutions That Promote Architectural Activism

In conjunction with establishment definitions, several institutions and programs have evolved to respond to the growing needs for community engagement through professional education and advocacy, service-learning opportunities, and community involvement initiatives. These programs include Design Corps’ Public Interest Design Institute, Architecture for Humanity, Habitat for Humanity, Design/Build programs and firms, and participatory design advocates such as PID. To inform a contemporary definition of Architectural Activism, it is important to look at these programs as means of articulating this definition.

**DESIGN CORPS – PUBLIC INTEREST DESIGN INSTITUTE**

Founded in 1991 by Bryan Bell, Design Corps aims to create positive change in communities in need through design by helping to address their social, economic, and environmental challenges (DESIGN CORPS mission statement). This program links success with direct community input and states “Our mission is realized when people are involved in the decisions that shape their lives.” To help facilitate the development of public interest design among practicing professionals, Design Corps offers a training program through the Public Interest Design Institute. Focusing on finding clients, fee structures, design partnership, leveraging assets, maximizing positive impact, the SEED metric (Social Economic Environmental Design), and re-shaping the profession, this program provides a formalized educational opportunity that that is not found in traditional architectural education OR structured in typical office practices. By reshaping the application of architectural design based on a “needs-driven” practice, public interest architects can realize the abundance of clients and through Design Corps’ training program can also realize a sustainable method to conduct such practice. Design Corps believes that the number of people the architect works with (typically referred to as “clients”) is not as limited as the “boundaries” of
the profession suggest. The proposed problem is that there is no money in these areas on behalf of these “clients” so Design Corps strives to train public interest architect in methods of obtaining funds and being able to support oneself and one’s practice.

ARCHITECTURE FOR HUMANITY

Supporting collaborative design processes and founded on the notion that everyone deserves access to good design, Architecture for Humanity, a non-profit 501c3 company\textsuperscript{7}, established a strong stance in advocating public interest architectural practices through their publication Design Like You Give a Damn. Founded in 1999 by Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr, Architecture for Humanity focused on disaster reconstruction, active spaces, community resilience, and educational spaces\textsuperscript{8}. They also facilitated positive interactions between communities and philanthropists, donors, and interested parties, by connecting project to a long list of partners and funders including the AIA, FEMA, Global Giving, Nike Inc., Oprah’s Angel Network, the Rockefeller Foundation, UN Habitat, and many more. Despite their unfortunate filing for bankruptcy in January 2015, Architecture for Humanity played a significant role in kick starting and popularizing a new humanitarian design movement, and helped to steer the Architectural profession towards a more comprehensive consideration of project opportunity and need – a scope of work that engages architects beyond the perceived “boundaries” of the profession - projects that are important, but have not traditionally received attention.

\textsuperscript{7} Unfortunately, Architecture for Humanity filed for bankruptcy in January of 2015, during the development of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{8} These are the four focus areas, as defined by the organization.
HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Habitat for Humanity grew from the Koinonia Farm, a 42-acre Christian community outside of Americus, Georgia. After becoming a millionaire from a business enterprise started in college, the 29-year old Millard Fuller and his wife Linda sold everything they had as a result of unhappiness, declining health, and a suffering marriage. In an effort to re-focus their lives, the Fullers found solace in a housing ministry beginning at the Koinonia Farm with Clarence Jordan.

“They built modest houses on a no-profit, no-interest basis, thus making homes affordable to families with low incomes. Homeowner families were expected to invest their own labor into the building of their home and the houses of other families. This reduced the cost of the house, increased the pride of ownership and fostered the development of positive relationships.”

~Millard Fuller: Habitat for Humanity International Founder

To enable continuous building efforts and projects, invested money and donations were placed in a revolving fund called ‘The Fund for Humanity.’ In 1976, Habitat for Humanity International was founded, and in 1984 President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn participated in a Habitat work trip in New York, further spreading recognition and advocating the program as a needed method of providing housing for those in need.

Today, Habitat for Humanity brings people of all skills and background into the field of community engagement through the construction of affordable homes. Habitat also acts as a service learning program for all college students, with particular significance to architecture students. Habitat offers an informal educational opportunity to experience hands-on building, community interaction and the dialog around construction, and exposure to what Sinha refers to as ‘soft’ information and data; encompassing culture, identity, voice, perception, and feeling.
Resulting from the public-interest architecture movement and in conjunction with the inception of community design centers in universities, design/build programs appeared as a strategy to actively engage architects and architecture students beyond the classroom or office to further expand the impact and relevance of the profession. Inherently, Design/Build provides architects and architecture students with a more intimate understanding of the projects conducted. Design/Build programs in academia have historically focused primarily on public interest projects and housing as a result of their connections with community design centers, with the one of the first Design/Build

Fig. 1.5 Habitat for Humanity has touched thousands of lives, including those in New Orleans, by constructing homes for those in need.
programs, Yale University’s Vlock Building Project, focusing on low income housing outside of New Haven in 1967.9

In the professional realm, design/build firms demonstrate the desire of some architects to apply skills and interests to the execution of their designs in the real world and demonstrate a reaction to the limitations of the “office architect”, but are also founded on principles of connectivity and efficient project communication to reduce costs, confusion, and conflict. Both academically and professionally, design-build strategies have grown in interest and effectiveness in relation to architectural activism, self-building, and informal settlements.

**PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PRACTICES**

One of the most prominent strategies in community engagement is the practice of participatory design. This practice directly involves community members in the dialog and design sessions that shape the projects for which they are the primary user/client. Participatory design has proven that collective decision making, community ownership of ideas, and empowerment through enabling active voice greatly strengthen the value and positive impacts of public interest projects.

![Participatory Design Practices Diagram](image)

**Fig. 1.6** Participatory design strategies can bring so much more than just design to the people/communities in which they engage.

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9 Yale’s program is now one of many design/build programs offered in collegiate schools of architecture.
Critique: How much of participatory design sessions serve as consultation (similar to client meetings), perpetuate the typical back-and-forth process of removed architectural design in the office, then interaction (checking in) and dialog, followed by the same iteration, and ultimately result in the delivery of a “product” to public? Is participatory design as impactful or effective as the public may perceive?

Despite the existing programs, we still see failure in effectively addressing community needs, such as the failed redevelopment of the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans. Perhaps a new engagement strategy that builds upon the principles and structures of existing programs is necessary.

1.3 A Combined Definition of Architectural Activism as Informed by the Establishment

The term “activism” is one that extends beyond the realm of architecture and has specific connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “Activism” as “the policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; specifically, the use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change. Based on the historical examples of what are commonly referred to as activists such as civil rights activists and political activists, there is an extremism associated with the term “activist.”

However, in the most simplistic sense, we can look at the term activist architect as a combination of “action” and “architect.” The resultant definition is: the use of architectural training and practices, which include design, communication, ethics, safety, and building, to bring about political change, social change, or change in the built environment; taking action to bring architectural design and thinking to those who need it.
SUMMARY OF EXISTING DISCOURSE

The following summary points are the key components and ideas that help to define the activist architect by establishing the existing discourse:

The Public Interest Architect

- serving those who need the most help
- fully dedicate to public service work while still making a living
- engaged in their communities
- entrepreneurial
- applies design skills and architectural ideas to problems previously considered the exclusive domain of public health officials, environmentalists, and community activists

The Citizen Architect

- advocates initiatives that enhance quality of life
• engages in local state and federal issues
• contributes beyond self to the community and human condition
• advocates for higher living standards
• Civic participation through writing, publishing, appointment to boards, and elected office

The Development Activist
• Well rounded with many skills beyond design
  o Development skills
  o Fundraising abilities
  o Management skills
• Practices reciprocal design
• Itinerant practice
• Hyper-resourcefulness
• Self-motivation & self-reliance
• Leaving the office
• Engaging the community, and seeking a need for design in that community, rather than passively waiting for clients to come to them.”

Design Corps (501(c)3 Nonprofit Organization)
• An intimate connection between thinking + doing/making
• Process informs design = better design
• Return of master builder
• More control for designer
• People are directly involved in decisions that shape their lives
• Needs-driven practice rather than client-driven

Architecture for Humanity (501(c)3 Nonprofit Organization)
• Design for the 98%
• Well networked with partners and funders
• In the media spotlight – focus public attention to design + humanitarian needs
Habitat for Humanity (501(c)3 Nonprofit Organization)
- Exposure to ‘soft’ data – culture, identity, voice, perception, feeling
- Come together through building

Design-Build (Professional Practices & Academic Programs)
- An intimate connection between thinking + doing/making
- Process informs design = better design
- Return of master builder
- More control for designer
- Get out of office and into the field
- Develop skills beyond the office

Participatory Design (Community Engagement Strategy)
- Direct community involvement in decisions
- Community ownership of ideas
- Social sustainability

Using principles and characteristics of the activist architect, as defined by the existing scholarship, practice, programs, etc., the activist architect can be described as one who takes architectural practice with him/her, commits to a community, and engages with that community’s building needs – as rejuvenation, or in more extreme cases, as response to disaster caused by war, weather, or economics. These informal situations (outside of the realm of office practices) call for the activist architect to be nimble, resourceful, and responsive (qualities of activism). In addition to knowing how to address site, adapt to local techniques and materials, respond to code and safety requirements, and design/build beautiful, well-structured buildings, the activist architect becomes an agent of change and a mediator in the network of professionals, partners, and potential resources and the community, while generating social capital10

10 Social Capital is defined by the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) as: the links, shared values, and understandings in society that enable individuals to trust each other, and so work together.
through dialog and relationships focused on design and building. By establishing an itinerant practice, the activist architect has the ability to go where they are needed, making the profession and its expertise more accessible to all.
CHAPTER TWO

Building the Definition through Case Studies in Architectural Activism from beyond the Profession

Who can we look to for guidance?  
What can we learn from those who live it?  
How does this inform/change the definition?

After establishing the activist architect as itinerant, embedded, resourceful, practices reciprocal design, and is well rounded with many skills beyond design, we can now examine several case studies to strengthen our understanding and further influence the definition of Architectural Activism. Although they do not identify themselves as activist architects, Samuel Mockbee, Kim Jae-kwan, and Martin Kaltwasser all exemplify characteristics of the activist architect through their architectural philosophy, dialog, and works.

In addition to helping us redefine activism in an architectural context, these case studies illustrate and demonstrate a contemporary dissatisfaction with architectural practices, the office, and how the public (or the people) perceives architects. The case studies also reveal that the drive to activate architecture is also reaction to both internal conflict and external outreach.
2.1 The “Citizen Architect” and Immersive Design Experience: A Moral Response by Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee

The Rural Studio would not exist as the successful and immersive academic program that it is today without the vision and beliefs of Samuel Mockbee. Sambo initially took a teaching job at Auburn to support himself and his firm as they financially struggled through doing the same type of community driven work that he and the Rural Studio is best known for today. His spirit of establishing meaningful relationships, providing for those who truly need it, and allowing the individual to have the primary impact on the project existed before the Rural Studio.

Sambo turned to academia to develop an active and engaged approach to provide architecture to people in need in his own backyard of Hale County, Alabama. His response is driven by the moral obligation the Mockbee believes is inherent to the profession.

Fig. 2.1 Sambo had the ability to engage and connect with people at any level of economic status. He believed and taught that all people, rich or poor, deserve to benefit from the power of good design.
“The main purpose of the Rural Studio is to enable each student to step across the threshold of misconceived opinions and to design/build with a 'moral sense' of service to a community. It is my hope that the experience will help the student of architecture to be more sensitive to the power and promise of what they do, to be more concerned with the good effects of architecture than with 'good intentions'. The Rural Studio represents an opportunity to be real in itself, the students become architects of their own education.

For me, these small projects have in them the architectural essence to enchant us, to inspire us, and ultimately, to elevate our profession. But more importantly, they remind us of what it means to have an American architecture without pretence. They remind us that we can be as awed by the simple as by the complex and that if we pay attention, this will offer us a glimpse into what is essential to the future of American architecture: its honesty.”


Through the Rural Studio, Mockbee provided students with an immersive experience in a project scenario that amplifies the feeling of moral obligation and a spiritual nature of architecture. Mockbee placed an immense amount of responsibility on the shoulders of the students, prompting action, intuitive decision making, and responsive design solution that are immediate and effective.

The Rural Studio offers an environment of education through experience. For the duration of the semester (or program), students live in Newbern and interact with clients on a weekly basis, while operating within the curriculum of Auburn’s architectural program.
Fig. 2.2  
The Rural Studio program was started in 1993.

Fig. 2.3  Recent/ongoing explorations of the Rural Studio include the $20,000 House – a low-cost but highly efficient home.

Critique:

1) The students come and go from semester to semester (no extended individual presence like a study abroad then back to “normal”)\(^{11}\)

2) These design/build projects “fall through the gaps” in regards to code inspection (or lack thereof). This is known and the studio takes advantage of this fact, but it cannot be done everywhere. This is a special case.

3) Aside from periodic consultation, there is more of a design/project DELIVERY to a client, than reciprocity of design thinking, knowledge exchange, and physical impact of the project – it is a “give a man a fish” method rather than a “teach a man to fish” method.

\(^{11}\) This is true of the 3rd year studio programs, but the 5th year program places the students there for an extended period of time to see project through from start to finish.
2.2 The Architect Reborn as “Home Repairman”: A Response of Accessibility and Community Value by Kim Jae-kwan

Kim Jae-kwan decidedly introduces himself as an ex-architect to make clear his newly defined role and intentions. Using the skills, knowledge, and experience he developed in dealing with the design and construction process, Kim began to create a more meaningful, helpful, and intimate connection with homeowners by transitioning from the role of architect to home repairman and woodworker. While the physical actions of his work may more clearly align with that of a woodworker, Kim Jae-kwan is a shining example of an activist architect.

Kim Jae-kwan worked as an architect, almost exclusively for churches, in South Korea for more than a decade, before realizing that his value as an architect could truly be felt by working directly with homeowners to provide better living environments rather than just building homes. This is not so much a question of inadequacy as a question of shifting values and priorities. Through the ‘Daily Architecture Office’ program, an event led by Kim as part of Seoul Open Night, architects opened their doors to the public to offer free consulting – advice for would-be architects, tips for civil complaints, introduce codes, or promote cultural functions of architecture (SPACE, 2011). Through this program, Kim realized that people know and respect architecture, but do not typically have access to the profession.

Fig. 2.4 Kim Jae-kwan exemplifies 1) the power of connection to individuals, 2) effective engagement outside of the apparent bounds of the profession, and 3) the importance of tools/tooling in design and architecture.
The focus of Kim’s work, and also the theme of the ‘Daily Architecture Office’, is called “Jip-suri” which can be translated to “home-repair”, though the English language does not retain the poetics or eloquence of the Korean word “Jip-suri.” More accurately, we could use the word “regeneration” to describe a transformation to new life encompassing history, life, appearance, and body, rather than simply a return to how it was (Archello article). Kim considers the history, environment, form, space, and structure of the home, but keeps people at the center by responding to the individuals with intimate design decisions. By changing his social status, Kim creating unique relationships with others by participating in urban social life associated with his new title of craftsman and woodworker.

Kim recognizes that this transformation suggests a new type of architect and that this may actually be our contemporary carpenter or contemporary craftsman. With a more engaged social presence, sound architectural design and building skills, and the capacity to build informal and formal relationships to both the community and the profession, Kim’s value, effectiveness, and happiness have all improved. Kwon Mi-ju, the writer in SPACE magazine, accurately evaluates Kim’s status regarding the title of architect in this excerpt:

“Although introducing himself as an ex-architect, if the roles and duties of an architect include helping people lead better lives in a better living space and providing people with designs to make a better living environment, rather than just building houses, then his [Kim Jae-kwan] title as architect still rings true.”
Using the beauty of found materials, Martin Kaltwasser, along with his partner Folke Köbberling, create interactive pieces of architectural work in public spaces. These works generate interaction and community dialog while not explicitly prescribing their use. This activist architect has stepped away from traditional architectural practice to engage in a dialog of radical material reuse and positive social change through self-built architecture.

**Fig. 2.5** Kaltwasser explores the beauty of radical material reuse and the dialog it can generate.

Kaltwasser’s design and building ethos presents a hyper-resourcefulness that has direct impact on the projects.

Kaltwasser does not practice (big A) Architecture. Instead, he explores the interactions between the public and spatial constructions, which inform
each other, through radical material utilization. Interventions involve community/people as components of the work.

One example of this interaction is the Gropiusstadt “Gecekondu” House. Kaltwasser and Köbberling spent the night driving around the city collecting discarded material from construction projects then built the house in a field in view of housing towers. This sparked interest and generated visits and dialog with interested community members from those housing towers, encounters which would have otherwise never taken place.

Kaltwasser’s work is criticized as projects built from junk that read as such. Despite this notion, the projects have a deeper commentary that draws attention to the surrounding environment or societal tendencies – amount of useful items/materials that are discarded, the ignorance of marginal spaces or materials, the beauty of material itself, simplicity of design elements that generate meaningful interactions.

Fig. 2.6 The “Gecekondu” House, located in the middle of a field, generated much interaction between Kaltwasser, Köbberling, and nearby community members.
2.4 Lessons Learned from Activist Architect Forefathers

- Long term immersion/exposure is key to understanding

- Work in your backyard (it’s easier to engage, and you know it best)

- Step down from the elevated status and into the community

- There is just as much beauty in interaction as in the architecture itself

- Happiness, comfort, and value improved as opposed to the perception that this change in the way they work would be uncomfortable for an architect

- Outside of the typical boundaries of the profession lie more opportunity and effectiveness
WORK SPACE
ADAPTABLE TOOL TRAILER
- Tools harbor embodied knowledge and memory
- Knowledge transmitted through tools
- Tools are an extension of self
- Tools make impossible tasks possible
  - provide strength/enhance body
- Tools are empowering
- Self-building & SELF-building
- Skills workshops
- Turn empty lot into building yard
- Workspace extends beyond walls of the unit
- Empowerment through building

FLEXIBLE COMMUNAL SPACE
MOBILE [CO]DESIGN STUDIO
- Immersion in community
- Community generated interventions/solutions
  - Inside-out instead of outside-in
- Reciprocity in design – Co-design studio
  - Drawing and modeling as communication
- Exchange of knowledge and experience
  - collective knowledge & direct feedback
- Communal design dialog
- Forum for community voice
- Relationship building around building
  - Social space & trust
- Neighbor/friend first, then architect
- Make Architecture accessible

LIVE SPACE
MICRO-HOUSE
- Embedded in community
- Micro-house
- Basic living needs
- Live in a place not “in a house”
- A neighbor is part of the community
- Out of the office
- Brings formal knowledge
- Student of the community
- Meals as a means to bring people together
- Supports work anywhere and everywhere
- Enables the itinerant

Fig. 2.7 Synthesis of ideas into the programmatic elements of Apparatus X.
CHAPTER THREE

Re-Defining the Activist Architect: A Comprehensive Development

How is an Activist Architect “Created”? What Makes Them So? How does the Activist Architect Engage?

After examining existing discourse from within the profession, and informing the definition of architectural activism using case studies from beyond the boundaries of the profession, it is crucial to recognize the additional factors that create/shape the activist architect, which include: 1) tangible and intangible qualities, 2) a difference in values, and 3) architectural education, 4) the sites and situations that draw the activist architect, and 5) the tools of empowerment/engagement.
3.1 Tangible and Intangible Qualities of Architectural Activism

EXPERIENCE & IMMERSION
Direct exposure vs. “Visits” (including digital exposure)

Direct exposure and immersion in a community, in which one becomes a neighbor in that community, makes community problems and concerns your problems and concerns. It turns the architect’s solutions (so often “delivered” from a removed position) into our solutions (as a community). This immersive and inclusive condition is not generated from site visits and client meetings (including community or “town hall” meetings).

Direct immersive experience is key to the shaping of the activist architect. Issues of architectural disparity in housing have existed for many years. Those who took interest have experienced these conditions, whether directly or indirectly, impacting the way they work and the value of their work with a different area of focus. Without experience, it is difficult to see a change in thought and practice.

Today, in the age of the Internet, there is a very open flow of information and access to conditions in areas of economic disparity, disaster, informal settlements, etc. Globalization has generally brought on an increased mobility, both physically and intangibly through the flow of ideas and information. With increased opportunity and awareness, volunteerism through church and non-profit programs, such as CHWC and Habitat for Humanity, have exposed people (specifically young people) to conditions and communities that require intervention. Experiences like these help to put the world in perspective and plant seeds of activism.

As the world increases accessibility through technology and media, academic projects and other interventions can be conducted from places removed from the site condition being addressed. These places and conditions can be studied, visited, and “understood,” but the true effectiveness lies in the exploration and immersion into one’s immediate
surroundings. Examples: Kim Jae-kwan – Korean housing situation – The Daily Architectural Office event; Samuel Mockbee – Moved academic program to the community in which it works.

The question “Why don’t you focus on the problems around you?” continually resurfaces. This is a very valid question, but spin it in an alternate, but equally important context: If the problem you are focusing on is not around you, why not? What will enable one to go to the problem, thus improving understanding and effectiveness?

**COMPASSION, SYMPATHY, LOVE FOR FELLOW MAN**

*Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic motivation; Moral; Spiritual obligation; A return or emphasis on ethics tied to real work*

Compassion, sympathy, and love for fellow man are all intangible motivators for action. *Extrinsic motivations* arise from outside of the individual and often involve rewards, while *intrinsic motivations* arise from within the individual and involve personal gratification, satisfaction, and happiness. As informed by the case studies, activist architects seem to blur the lines between the two, resulting in a hybrid motivation that involves the physical production of an architectural work and the happiness associated with it from both the community member and the architect.

How does one learn these qualities? From where does this originate?

These factors are human nature, but they are not equally felt or experienced in all people. Despite religious and spiritual connections to these factors, they are more directly informed by experience and immersion (previously mentioned) with people and the development of relationships that draw these qualities out of someone. It is dependent
then on the individual to retain the value and in turn translate these feelings to action$^{12}$.

**HOLISTIC THINKING**
*The big picture; The ability to step outside to see it; Not just reactionary response*

It can be argued that this notion is something all architects should be able to do. However, the ability to step into the community dialog/mind/framework, while offering a holistically-minded perspective – especially in the case of a community project where there are numerous stakeholders and various levels both horizontally and vertically – enables the activist architect to understand the areas/goals that can be most effectively impacted, as well as the stakeholders that are affected by (and can affect) each aspect of the big picture. This skill also illustrates the type of inclusive relationship that an activist architect has to his/her community.

$^{12}$ Some prime examples of compassion, sympathy, and love for fellow man can be found in: St. Francis – The Franciscans, Mother Teresa – Sisters of Loreto & Missionaries of Charity, Catholic Heart WorkCamp, and Habitat for Humanity.
3.2 A Change in Values – An Inherent Dissatisfaction

*Market forces (capitalistic) vs. People; Relationships; Community; AND the changing realm of architectural practices*

2 different changes:

1 – Change in value system (from the eyes of the activist architect)
FROM: a perspective that emphasizes monetary value, serving a clientele, both individual and corporate, that has the wealth to pay for architectural services and specialized design
TO: a perspective that values the quality of life and provision of basic needs particularly shelter, that all individuals, rich or poor deserve.

2 – Change in the value of the architect as a professional in the design and construction processes
Architect was once one of the four titles that actually defined the term “profession” with the other three being doctor, lawyer, and clergy. Even further back in time, the architect was the “master builder” literally defined as such: *arkhi* meaning “chief” and *tekton* meaning “builder, carpenter.” Historically, this well respected position was highly valued as an important contributor and shaper of society and the built environment. Today, as cost efficiency and energy efficiency continue to rise as primary drivers for building design, the architect has become more and more marginalized. Together with the removal of responsibility, and therefore liability for building failure, these factors have effectively devalued the architect in the overall scope of building design.
3.3 Architectural Education in Relation to Activism

Formal (NAAB-centric) vs. Informal (experiential; volunteer)

FORMAL EDUCATION

In the United States, a majority of University-based schools of architecture are aligned with the National Architectural Accrediting Board requirements. In relation to NAAB accreditation, schools of architecture prioritize curriculum/pedagogy that prepares students to take positions in professional offices and take exams for licensure. Architectural Activism—which partially relies on elements of the formal education prescribed by NAAB—includes skills and experience that are not easy to teach or support thus activism in school programs is not sanctioned or prioritized.


“Realm A: Critical Thinking and Representation. Graduates from NAAB-accredited programs must be able to build abstract relationships and understand the impact of ideas based on the study and analysis of multiple theoretical, social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental contexts. Graduates must also be able to use a diverse range of skills to think about and convey architectural ideas, including writing, investigating, speaking, drawing, and modeling.”

“Realm B: Building Practices, Technical Skills, and Knowledge. Graduates from NAAB accredited programs must be able to comprehend the technical aspects of design, systems, and materials and be able to apply that comprehension to architectural solutions. In addition, the impact of such decisions on the environment must be well considered.”

“Realm C: Integrated Architectural Solutions. Graduates from NAAB-accredited programs must be able to demonstrate that they have the
ability to synthesize a wide range of variables into an integrated design solution.”

“Realm D: Professional Practice. Graduates from NAAB-accredited programs must understand business principles for the practice of architecture, including management, advocacy, and the need to act legally, ethically, and critically for the good of the client, society, and the public.”

A strong architectural foundation provided by a formal curriculum prepares the architect with a particular skill set to effectively and responsibly contribute to society and the public good. Formal education also teaches professionalism and proper means to conduct oneself, which becomes particularly important when the activist architect interacts with stakeholders – political, financial, or related professions – on behalf of the community members with which they work.

The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards requires an additional component of formal education for the architect through internship experience. Just as immersive experience in communities is important to the intangible values and understanding of the activist architect, so is the internship experience in a professional office setting.

INFORMAL EDUCATION

In addition to the formal education provided by NAAB-centric university programs which develops valuable architectural and visual communication skills, participation in things like charities, church organizations, youth groups, and volunteerism provides immersive experiences, informal education, and helps to build intangible skills - communication, relationship-building, compassion, sympathy, understanding, holistic vision, progressive dialog, and character growth.
Community service initiatives such as the Catholic Heart WorkCamp (CHWC) have provided opportunities for full engagement through home improvement projects in cities all over the US since 1993. This program advocates the power and importance of establishing a relationship with the people which they serve and place more importance on these relationships than on the build projects themselves.

Other programs that foster the activist architect are not directly part of academia, but has connections to it. The AIAS Freedom By Design Program engages with the surrounding community to assist in accessibility issues that low-income and disabled individuals deal with in their own homes. AIAS chapters across the US, establish real relationships with those in need and use some of their design skills to design and build solutions. Although extra-curricular and not fully immersive, this program helps students to experience engagement in a way not prescribed in academia and to begin to develop as activist architects.

As a non-profit program, Habitat for Humanity has worked its way into university culture, offering alternative spring break trips to college students. These trips often focus on a build project individuals in less fortunate communities.

If we look again at what’s happening in education today, in terms of architectural activism, there are certain programs that routinely put people in situations to work for the social good, respond to the need for architecture in less fortunate communities, and foster the development of activist architects through hand-on learning and immersive experiences – such as the Rural Studio.

However, despite similar informal notions that are presented and experienced through immersive design/build programs like Mockbee’s Rural Studio, neither academic community engagement projects, nor alternative volunteer experiences provide a community driven framework
where solutions are generated through reciprocal design dialog and a grassroots, community owned strategy for progress.

### 3.4 The Situations, Sites, and Communities in which Activist Architects Work

Activist Architects work in the margins: To address complicated issues that are controlled in particular ways – through politics, laws, code, and other factors that limit action; To take advantage of gaps in the discourse; To utilize available resources – materials, participants/builders, thoughts/ideas, momentum, community presence through existing organizations. As Sinha suggests, these areas can be complicated and chaotic, but there is opportunity to work with ‘fuzzy logic’, ‘soft’ information and data, informal settlements, new types of urban morphologies such as the code-resistant megacity, sustainable development, and culture. These conditions prompt creativity and intelligent design that is highly informed by the conditions themselves, and more so by those directly affected by them (who typically have the most offer to the solution). In recognizing this, the activist architect offers something beyond the simple “delivery” of a solution – they offer a dialog/forum for the exchange of design thinking and a collective knowledge that collaboratively produces effective solutions.

Just as the activist architect nimbly responds to limiting site conditions and resource availability, the role also requires a nimble understanding and sensitivity to place – local traditions, culture, and social structure. Although addressing this issue is primarily learned via Realm A of the NAAB criteria, it is amplified when the architect is directly exposed to the place. As a removed designer, the impact of misunderstanding or misinterpreting local tradition, culture, or social structure can negatively affect the success of architectural intervention, but the consequence (particularly in the theoretical works of academia) does not always make it back to the architect. As an engaged activist, the community is YOUR
community. As a contributor to the tradition, culture, and social structure, the potentially negative effects of a misunderstanding or misinterpretation are directly felt/experienced. However, it is the hope of this activist practice that misunderstandings do not occur as a result of the engrained and collaborative nature of design thinking suggested by this thesis.

The sites/context where we typically find the activist architect consist of the following scenarios and situations: underprivileged communities, displacement due to war, weather, or economy, poor and informal housing, economic instability, inadequate access to water and sanitation, insecurity of tenure, and lack of basic services.
**Activist Architect**

- Itinerant
- Mobile
- Embedded
- Practices reciprocity in design
- Encourages self-progressive thought and action
- Possesses many comprehensive skills beyond design
- Responds nimbly to adverse conditions
- Is a community member, a neighbor, a friend
- Has the ability to cross the thresholds of the realms of the profession – and works in the MARGINS
- Offers compassion and understanding
- Practices sound judgment and professional etiquette
- Listens as well as speaks when called upon to do so
- Can holistically contribute to communities in need

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**ADDITIONAL INPUTS/QUALITIES THAT SHAPE/CREATE THIS IN THE ARCHITECT**

**EXPERIENCE & IMMERSION**

- direct exposure vs. visits (also digitally)

**COMPASSION, SYMPATHY, LOVE FOR FELLOW MAN**

- Extrinsic vs. intrinsic motivation, moral, spiritual

**A CHANGE IN VALUES**

- monetary (capitalist) vs. relationships, people, community
- AND changing realm of architectural practices

**HOLISTIC THINKING**

- the big picture, the ability to step INSIDE and OUT

**ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION**

- formal (NAAB-centric) vs. informal (experiential, volunteer)

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*Fig. 3.1* The Activist Architect is a comprehensive combination of many factors – those learned from the existing discourse, the lessons learned from our activist architect forefathers, and some that are cultivated through education and experience.
3.5 Tooling as a Means to Engage and Transmit Knowledge and Skills Needed for Participation in Progress

Tools harbor an embodied knowledge and memory. Tools are created as an extension of self to enable the completion of a task incapable of being competed by natural or human process/action alone. Since tools are typically governed by specificity of task – hammering, tightening a screw, nut, or bolt, sawing, prying cutting, etc. – dissociation of the tool with the task is nearly impossible. As a result, many tools prompt a natural interaction with the user, and thus inherently transmit knowledge and skill.

Armed with a mastery of tools and the physical artifacts themselves, and activist architect can allow the tools to transmit knowledge with equal if not greater effectiveness than what the architect is able to articulate themselves.

Tools make an impossible task possible – provide strength. Tools are empowering – The tool alone cannot be productive, nor the hand alone be effective. The true strength lies in the marriage of the hand and the tool.
A tool is an extension of self that enables the completion of a task incapable of being completed by natural or human processes alone.

Fig. 3.2 Tools are a beautiful creation of man.
CHAPTER FOUR

Apparatus X as a Manifestation of Architectural Activism

How can we embody/enable the definition of the Activist Architect?

In the physical sense, Apparatus X is a reconstructed recreation vehicle built and designed through collaboration using reclaimed and donated materials and a budget from contributors who believe in its cause, effectiveness, and importance. However, the physical product results from employing and practicing the ideals that help to define the activist architect. The intangible characteristics and processes remain relatively unseen in the snapshot of the physical project, but are vital to its success.

Apparatus X is more than a tool – it is an idea and a catalyst. It is the manifestation of a self-sufficient, engaged, and meaningful activism, founded on the reciprocity of design thinking, collective knowledge, and self-progressivism. It acts as one solution to the gaps in the existing discourse.
APPARATUS X IS THE EXTENSION OF A COMMUNITY, ENABLING BUILDING AND DESIGN THAT RESPONDS TO THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY THAT HAVE/ARE NOT BEING EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED.

Fig. 4.1 Perspective view of the fully opened unit.
4.1 Apparatus X Overview

Apparatus X is a self-sufficient unit that acts as an adaptable tool trailer, mobile design studio, and micro living unit designed to take architectural activism to people who need help in rebuilding after conflict, natural disasters, or catastrophic failures in infrastructures that support housing (such as financial, or governmental). It is a project that is not just about design-build, but social engagement and action. Composed of live space, work space, and flexible communal space, Apparatus X provides a forum for community voice and the exchange of design thinking.

Through an embedded physical presence in the community, it makes the architect, and the profession of architecture, directly accessible to those who need architecture’s skills, knowledge and sensibilities, rather than relegating community engagement to a removed position. With a prepared physical presence, the activist architect can engage in design activities and tasks WITH the community rather FOR the community. In this way, there is reciprocity in learning, designing, and building that provides local knowledge and direct feedback to the activist architect, creating an environment of effective design and engagement for the betterment of communities and individuals in need. Apparatus X and the type of engagement it supports are not simply about participatory design, but rather responding to the needs of an individual on both a temporal and a metaphysical level. At the core of Apparatus X lie the principles of education through experience, tooling and building as empowerment, and an attitude of self-progressive community activism.

Due to the variable destinations and the uncertainty of available utilities in the environments in which the activist architect works, Apparatus X is entirely self-sufficient. The unit employs a power collection & storage system, as well as a water collection & filtration system. The 8’x24’ tow-behind trailer is spatially redistributed into three 8’x8’ blocks to accommodate for the three main programmatic elements.
APPARATUS X IS BOTH A SHARED TOOL OF THE ACTIVIST ARCHITECT AND THE COMMUNITY, AND AN
ATTEMPT TO PREPARE AN ACTIVIST ARCHITECT FOR EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT.
IT IS A TOOL OF ANTICIPATION - A TOOL DESIGNED FOR ENGAGEMENT; A TOOL PREPARED TO ADDRESS
UNKNOWN FACTORS THAT SHAPE RE-BUILDING EFFORTS.

Fig. 4.2 Apparatus X started as a 1977 Chateau Lite tow-behind trailer.
APPARATUS X ADVOCATES AN EMBEDDED PRESENCE IN THE COMMUNITY, GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY GENERATED INTERVENTIONS/SOLUTIONS (INSIDE-OUT INSTEAD OF OUTSIDE-IN), RECIPROCITY IN DESIGN DIALOG (NOT A PROJECT DELIVERY SCENARIO), COLLECTIVE KNOWLEDGE (COMBINING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND DIRECT FEEDBACK), AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH BUILDING/TOOLING.

Fig. 4.3 View of the interior of the old trailer during deconstruction.
At the core of Apparatus X lie the principles of education through experience, tool and building as empowerment, and an attitude of self-progressive community activism.

Fig. 4.4 The damaged 2"x2" wooden grid frame of the old trailer.
Q1

HOW DOES FORMAL AND INFORMAL KNOWLEDGE, PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, AND EXPERIENCE – EMBODIED AND TRANSMITTED THROUGH ARCHITECTURE – GET TO COMMUNITIES IN ORDER TO AFFECT CHANGE?

Fig. 4.5 Another step in deconstruction – a view after the aluminum and tar roof was removed.
IF THE ACTIVIST ARCHITECT IS CREATED THROUGH THE COMBINATION OF INFORMAL EXPERIENCE, IMMERSION, COMPASSION, SYMPATHY, UNDERSTANDING, HOLISTIC THINKING, PROPER APPLICATION OF SKILLS, RESOURCEFULNESS, POLITICS, AND FORMAL TRAINING, HOW DOES ONE PREPARE FOR THOSE THINGS EDUCATIONALLY?

**Q2**

**Fig. 4.6** The base frame and new platform get a fresh coat of paint.
Q3

WHAT IN ADDITION TO BUILDING, DRAWING, CRAFT KNOWLEDGE, AND EXPERIENCE, ENABLES THE ACTIVIST ARCHITECT TO ENGAGE IN A MEANINGFUL WAY?

Fig. 4.7 Rendering of Apparatus X illustrating the expanded tooling area, fold-out porch, and shading devices.
4.2 Transmitting Architectural Knowledge through a Tool

Tools evolve. Apparatus X is the evolution of a tool. If a tool is created as an extension of self to enable the completion of a task incapable of being completed by natural or human process/action alone, then Apparatus X is the extension of a community enabling building projects and design that responds to the needs of the community that have not/are not being effectively addressed.

Originally titled as ‘Apparatus X: An Activist Architect’s Tool for Engagement’, this chapter speaks to something beyond something only used by the activist architect. Apparatus X is also the tool of the people, bringing the realm of architecture, including tools and design, to those who need it, and providing empowerment through building.

As a forward to the book ‘Building Back Better’, which addresses developmental post-disaster reconstruction, Nabeel Hamdi captures some pertinent points regarding the context of the activist architect and Apparatus X:

“I have come to believe that in order to be an effective enabler you have to be a prudent provider. I have come to believe that there are four integrally related sets of responsibility vital to good practice: providing, enabling, adapting, and sustaining (PEAS). Together these define the ideals, responsibilities and activities of development practice. How much of each and how they relate together depends on context and circumstances.

There will always be things and resources that we provide. What we provide to save lives (food, tents, first aid, information) will be different to what we provide for the longer term to build livelihoods (skills, knowledge, land, money, materials).

The question is what and how much should be provided to meet the needs of now; and how much and when so that we can sustain development over the longer term? What kind of catalyst interventions will start a process of long-term reconstruction, rather than pre-empt it? We also know that change and the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances over time is a resource to
sustain well-being, and build a sense of belonging and the resilience of community. It is a resource for building all sorts of assets, tangible and intangible. How should we think about change and resilience as integral to our planning and design in post-disaster reconstruction?

Providing catalysts, promoting enablement – community as well as market and political enablement – building the capacity for change, the ability to be adaptive socially and spatially, are all integral to sustaining reconstruction as a developmental and not just relief process. Together they define a culture of practice, practical in its objectives and strategic in its purpose and endeavors. Being strategic, after all, is synonymous with being sustainable."

~Building Back Better, Forward by Nabeel Hamdi

As an enabler, the activist architect can help to promote empowerment through building in communities that have experienced the feeling of hopelessness as a result of displacement due to war, weather, or economics. Through tooling, building, participatory design processes, or hands-on building and cleanup activities enabled by the interaction with Apparatus X, community members actively participate to make a difference in shaping their surrounding environment. As basic as this can be, participation acts as enabling activity renewing intangible aspects to community: pride, confidence, comfort, and care. In this sense, self-building holds two meanings: 1) the physical act of construction conducted by oneself, and 2) the intangible and internal fostering of confidence, pride, self-esteem, etc. within the character of an individual (similar to the activities that counseling service can offer).

As a provider, the activist architect, as defined in this text, brings the self-elevated profession of architecture out of the ivory tower and into a community that can benefit from architectural intervention, but is typically deprived of such meaningful and lasting interactions. Through Apparatus X, a commitment to the community from an activist architect can make the profession accessible, thus not only transmitting the knowledge embodied in the tools provided by the unit, but also the knowledge/design thinking typically reserved by the profession.
Apparatus X used as an embedded community tool can both serve the community and address the needs highlighted by the existing discourse.

### 4.3 Apparatus X as Adaptable Tool Trailer

As an adaptable tool trailer, Apparatus X is capable of transforming an empty lot into a workspace. Beginning with the inception of the project in the B.Arch. thesis, the idea of building as empowerment is key to the intentions and success of Apparatus X. In order to build, a workspace, tools, and general means of construction are necessary. Since the variability of conditions of architectural activism sites will typically not be able to support a program of building/construction, it is required that Apparatus X is able to do so.

The enclosed unit of the workspace encompasses an 8’ x 8’ area at the rear of the unit. The back wall and rear passenger side wall lift to form awnings supplying covered work space (shielded from sun and light rain). The driver’s side wall houses a work bench, tool storage slots, and drawer slides to access removable work buckets. This side workspace is mounted on rollers and slides outward from the trailer to create a larger interior space as needed. This slide-out also contains a worktable broken down into movable halves that can be assembled exterior to the unit. After lifting the skin, an operable tool armature housing a table saw and miter saw swings out from the back right corner of the trailer allowing for ease of use of these important tools. Beneath the back awning lies a pivoting tool rack housing a variety of easy access hands tools. The final component of the adaptable tool trailer is the rolling hardware chest, containing many of the heavy elements associated with construction. Due to its weight, this toolbox acts as a moveable counterweight that can be centered over the axles when traveling, thus increasing the stability of the unit in transit.
Fig. 4.8  Perspective view of Apparatus X with programmatic areas.
Fig. 4.9 Plan view of Apparatus X with spatial breakdown.
Fig. 4.10  Elevation views of the new trailer in the fully “open” state.
Fig. 4.11  Perspective view of the workspace, illustrating Apparatus X as adaptable tool trailer.
Tools harbor embodied knowledge and memory
Knowledge transmitted through tools
Tools are an extension of self
Tools make impossible tasks possible
- provide strength/enhance body
Tools are empowering
Self-building & SELF-building
Skills workshops
Turn empty lot into building yard
Workspace extends beyond walls of the unit
Empowerment through building

Fig. 4.12 Plan view of the workspace with functional list.

Fig. 4.13 Back perspective view of expanded workspace.
4.4 Apparatus X as Mobile Design Studio

With an open central module layout, Apparatus X can act a mobile design studio for both individual and community design, and aims to foster collective knowledge and provide a collaborative learning environment. In order to make the profession accessible, the activist architect leaves the office and embeds in a place. To do so, an itinerant but functioning space must be able to provide similar capabilities and tools to the office counterpart. But what is needed in an office?

This question manifests itself in the mobile design studio program of Apparatus X – providing drafting tools and workspace/work surface as the primary requirements. Other necessary items – paper, modeling materials, thoughts, concepts, ideas – all generate from the community. Paper can be found (i.e. newspaper, craftpaper, etc.), and model materials can consist of almost anything.

As an additional aspect of Apparatus X that aims to enable greater participation and provide increased access to design tools, is the use of a projector in conjunction with a chalkboard surface to display information and design, while promoting drawing and design dialog among a greater audience. Considering that drawing acts as a means of universal communication, large drawing surfaces are key to promoting design dialog, conveying ideas, and providing an inclusive medium. Through the use of alternative media strategies – photographs, chalk, and projections – design can build and develop across a multiplicity of perspective and inputs creating in a way a palimpsest of design intention.
FLEXIBLE COMMUNAL SPACE
MOBILE [CO]DESIGN STUDIO

- Immersion in community
- Community generated interventions/solutions
  - Inside-out instead of outside-in
- Reciprocity in design – Co-design studio
  - Drawing and modeling as communication
- Exchange of knowledge and experience
  - Collective knowledge & direct feedback
- Communal design dialog
- Forum for community voice
- Relationship building around building
  - Social space & trust
- Neighbor/friend first, then architect
- Make Architecture accessible

Fig. 4.14 Plan view of the flexible communal space with functional list.

Fig. 4.15 Section view through communal space illustrating the extension of space, design, and engagement.
4.5 Apparatus X as Micro-Living Unit

Apparatus X, the micro living unit, functions efficiently and illustrates a comfortable and efficient living environment for the inhabitant (the activist architect). If travel and embedding into a community is essential, the unit must be able to provide support for living anywhere and everywhere.

The unit contains a small, enclosed wet bathroom including toilet and shower, a personal storage area for clothing and other items, a sink, stove, and oven operating on propane. The bed is mounted on rails overhead (enabling even weight distribution and variable arrangement), the underside of which doubles as a lighting fixture, and also functions as a couch. The table folds out from the same rolling unit that is defined as the heavy toolbox. The unit also has a fold out porch. While it can be argued that a porch is unnecessary to the overall concept of the design, it is actually an important design feature addressing sensitivity to place. The original Apparatus X unit is intended to begin service in a neighborhood with a traditionally lively porch culture, the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans. The porch, along with the kitchen table, is a place of informal thought exchange (friendly/neighborly conversation); A place of trust built through relationships; A place of home and comfort.

In addition to the living requirements, the micro-living space is also a commentary on the efficiency of living spaces, and a reaction to the excessive square footage of the modern American home. It is a peripheral goal of Apparatus X to contribute to the momentum of the micro-housing movement and to exemplify a comfortable living space that conveys the idea that you live in a PLACE; a COMMUNITY; you merely sleep, hold possessions, assess personal hygiene, and sometimes eat in a house.
LIVE SPACE
MICRO-HOUSE

- Embedded in community
- Micro-house
- Basic living needs
- Live in a place not “in a house”
- A neighbor is part of the community
- Out of the office
- Brings formal knowledge
- Student of the community
- Meals as a means to bring people together
- Supports work anywhere and everywhere
- Enables the itinerant

Fig. 4.16 Plan view of the live space with functional list.

Fig. 4.17 Section view of the live space illustrating the plenum floor and slide out 2.
4.6 Apparatus X as a Place/Forum for Communal Design

Aside from existing community organizations, town hall forums, and occasional interactions with political representatives, where can community members have a voice particularly in building and design issues in relation to their very immediate surroundings within their neighborhood? Particularly in areas recently disrupted by disaster, what forums can act as dependable but comfortable outlets to communicate ideas both formally and informally? It is this gap that calls for a response via Apparatus X.

It is this notion that ties most directly back to the historical applications of activism. The connection to community organizations becomes particularly important here. It cannot be expected that a foreign entity such as Apparatus X, piloted by an individual likely without immediate connections to the community, would effectively serve as a forum for community voice. However, through partnerships and strong connections to community organizations already located there, the tools provided by Apparatus X can amplify and enhance these efforts, especially in the realm of architectural intervention.
WORK SPACE
ADAPTABLE TOOL TRAILER
- Tools harbor embodied knowledge and memory
- Knowledge transmitted through tools
- Tools are an extension of self
- Tools make impossible tasks possible
  - provide strength/enhance body
- Tools are empowering
- Self-building & SELF-building
- Skills workshops
- Turn empty lot into building yard
- Workspace extends beyond walls of the unit
- Empowerment through building

FLEXIBLE COMMUNAL SPACE
MOBILE (CO)DESIGN STUDIO
- Immersion in community
- Community generated interventions/solutions
  - Inside-out instead of outside-in
- Reciprocity in design – Co-design studio
  - Drawing and modeling as communication
- Exchange of knowledge and experience
  - collective knowledge & direct feedback
- Communal design dialog
- Forum for community voice
- Relationship building around building
  - Social space & trust
- Neighbor/friend first, then architect
- Make Architecture accessible

LIVE SPACE
MICRO-HOUSE
- Embedded in community
- Micro-house
- Basic living needs
- Live in a place not “in a house”
- A neighbor is part of the community
- Out of the office
- Brings formal knowledge
- Student of the community
- Meals as a means to bring people together
- Supports work anywhere and everywhere
- Enables the itinerant

Fig. 4.18 Spatial representation of Apparatus X with corresponding functional lists. Apparatus X as the manifestation of architectural activism.
4.7 Apparatus X – The Design/Build Project

As a scaled down version, the design/build project of Apparatus X was intentionally but poetically conducted as an exercise in architectural activism. The project – problems, procedures, interest groups, required roles – closely paralleled the work and scenarios expected to be encountered in the actual communities of architectural activism.

- Relationships were forged with groups internal and external to the architecture department
- The siting of the project required discussions and professionalism that was very political in nature including code and other issues
- Many materials were “harvested” and reused in the project
- The project required developing a strategy to fundraise in order to make it possible
- Publicity, attention, and awareness became important

There were many lessons learned, but the pertinent ones are as follows:

- There will always be rules to accept and rules to challenge
- Education and learning processes are more effectively absorbed through action
- Project realization requires a collection of self-interest to achieve success
- Incentives motivate
- Action breeds response

This project took on a second and perhaps more meaningful role in helping to develop the abilities and skillset of an activist architect because it developed in a multi-disciplinary academic setting. This network of engagement has a place in architectural education and can enhance the way in which more university programs foster the development of the activist architect, an area of needed expansion and acknowledgement.
The overall execution of the project resulted in a network of stakeholders and interest groups all of which negotiated and interacted with the project manager/student of architectural activism. Since a definitive hierarchy of the roles required to realize this project does not exist, it was necessary to nimbly respond to the situation at hand. The activist architect must be present and wear the hat that needs to be worn resulting in continuous cycling – designer, PR, administrative, political, finance, business, teacher, builder, networking, community member, student, friend.

The project prompted the facilitation of collaborations between student groups in architecture, engineering, and landscape architecture through an independent study course which provided experience in participatory design, collective knowledge, and reciprocal design and dialog. Materialistically, Apparatus X drew from diverse sources including salvaged materials from the theatre department, the university salvage yard, local builders, donated new products, and re-usable material from the deconstruction of the original RV unit, illustrating a necessary hyper-resourcefulness.

Ultimately, the action and facilitation required of the student project leader provided an experience in architectural activism and responsibility that poetically paralleled the roles and situations that are necessary and expected in the actual project implementation of Apparatus X in communities in need.
Fig. 4.19 Sketchbook sample – Initial spatial studies and adaptability considerations.
Fig. 4.20  Continuous roll of ideas – bathroom layouts, operable components, and roof considerations.
Fig. 4.21 Existing conditions – the starting point of design.
The disassembly of existing systems provided learning opportunities and design considerations.
Fig. 4.23  To echo the ethos of Architectural Activism, the first step was to engage the student community. This was done through a facilitating organization called New Leaf and resulted in a partnership with ESW. Further student engagement included conducting an independent study course focused on designing and construction components of Apparatus X.
Fig. 4.24  Students participated in many components of design and construction in the independent study course.
The capstone project is to design and install a complete water system for the Apparatus X vehicle. The system should demonstrate innovative approaches to water conservation and reuse that could be applied in homes today. The end uses include personal hygiene (showering and sink), toilet, cooking, drinking, and gardening. To the extent possible, the system should require as little input of potable water and discharge of sewage as feasible. In addition to functioning as intended, the system should be designed to make that functioning visible and didactic.

Upon completion, this trailer (along with Aaron) will travel to the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans to begin its outreach mission and work with a nonprofit community center. Eventually, the trailer will travel around the country, aiding the effort to rebuild damaged communities from coast to coast. Similar to Habitat for Humanity, the future development of an alternative spring break program allows students from across the university to participate in community engagement projects targeting sustainability, humanitarianism, and disaster response as second responders (an opportunity that has previously not been prevalently offered). In this way, any student throughout the university will have the option to join Apparatus X in its efforts to rebuild damaged communities for a week. This can be done due to the mobile nature of the project.

**Fig. 4.25** An additional engagement with the engineering capstone program yielded the design of the Apparatus X water collection and filtration system.
The functional systems of Apparatus X are housed in the plenum floor.
This series of photographs illustrates the replacement of the wooden frame with a welded steel frame.
Fig. 4.30, 4.31, 4.32 The new steel frame enables strength AND adaptability.
Fig. 4.33 A successful fundraising campaign did two things: 1) showed that people believe in the idea, and 2) provided a budget for material purchasing during fabrication.

Fig. 4.34 Apparatus X boasts a list of partners and sponsors (both monetary and product donations).
Fig. 4.35  Apparatus X has been featured in the media on several occasions to help raise awareness and funding.
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP
[THE LOWER NINTH WARD VILLAGE]

Fig. 4.36 As the community partner of Apparatus X, the Lower Ninth Ward Village, led by Mack McClendon, shares the vision of Apparatus X to enable and empower residents of the Lower Ninth Ward.
CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The activist architect is itinerant, mobile, embedded, practices reciprocity in design, possesses many comprehensive skills beyond design, responds nimbly to adverse conditions, is a community member, a neighbor, a friend, has the ability to cross the thresholds of the realms of the profession, offers compassion and understanding, while practicing sound judgment and professional etiquette, listens as well as speaks when called upon to do so, and can holistically contribute to communities in need.

The state of Apparatus X lies somewhere in the intersection (or perhaps the gap) of academy and practice, and crosses the bounds of the profession in a way that is needed, but challenging. With a prepared physical presence, Apparatus X enables the activist architect to extend and engage communities in ways that are meaningful and sensitive, but comfortable through alternative acts of design thinking. Apparatus X takes advantage of the marginalized realm of activism, and supports the ability to contribute meaningfully to complex situations of the modern world regarding housing disparity, changing building paradigms, and limited resource availability. Apparatus X makes architecture accessible, engages in design activities and tasks WITH the community rather FOR the community, and creates a reciprocity/exchange/dialog of learning, design, and action. As an architectural variable, X will continue to evolve as a tool of architectural activism.

Apparatus X was chosen as a variable. Apparatus X is an idea, not always a thing. It is more than just a trailer or a tool. It is a process, a problem, a catalyst, and sometimes a person.
The mission in coming years is thus:
To encourage and enable others to build the environment in which they live and to contribute meaningfully to both the architectural discourse of the activist architect and to the public good.

Upon completion, it is intended that Apparatus X will travel to New Orleans to begin this mission and to continue on the trajectory of the 25-year plan.

Fig. 4.37 Apparatus X operates in the margin.

Fig. 4.38 The 25-year vision guides Apparatus X along its journey.
Fig. 4.39 & 4.40  These photos illustrate a few steps of deconstruction and reconstruction.
Fig. 4.41 & 4.42  Apparatus X will be completed in Fall 2015.
Bibliography


Appendices
ARCHITECTURE AS A CATALYST FOR SELF-PROGRESSIVISM:
A CONSTRUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT IN THE LOWER NINTH WARD

by: Aaron C. Wertman

THESIS STATEMENT

This thesis aims to shape an innovative and effective method to rebuild as well as educate communities and to promote an active and self-progressivistic attitude in economically struggling areas.

By promoting the autonomous development of a resilient community through self-progressivistic architectural activism, the rebuilding process and the architect’s role changes. It evolves from that of a removed designer to an engaged activist. In current home building practice, there is a disconnect between the user and the architect, knowledge & skills, and materials necessary to construct and shape one’s own environment, home, and thus their identity. By becoming an active member of the community, the architect sets an example, working alongside community members to rebuild not only homes and community, but also a collective knowledge that can benefit beyond the building yard. This active engagement fosters empowerment through building. The education-through-experience process acts as a critique of architectural education, implements the radical reuse of materials, and emphasizes the relationship between materials & tools, drawing & building, and the user & architect.

The notion of engagement is very important. The project requires a social aspect that allows for knowledge and skills to be shared in an accommodating and comfortable forum where the architect and the user are equals – working together, not separate. Both parties can learn from the other, enhancing the community aspect of building.

This is different from current efforts because the project promotes self-progressivistic and autonomous home rebuilding, instead of a reliance on government or non-profit and aid agencies. “Autonomy” in this case means “ownership” or mastery of the means of production (money, materials, knowledge, skills, design thinking, etc.).

PROJECT GOALS

To encourage a self-progressivistic approach to shaping one’s own environment particularly in a poorer context where there is a lack of immediate means to do so.

To provide tools, catalysts, or resources that enable autonomous progress, instead of providing the built environment itself.

To explore/utilize available materials “junk” (low-cost, used), advocating radical reuse and resourcefulness, while implementing a critical regionalism approach to the built environment.

To redefine sustainability through a resilient, efficient, and self-progressivistic community.

Appendix A Synopsis of original case study exploring the role of architecture in community engagement and empowerment through building