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CITYSPACE

The Social Life of Design



Tower of Power: This Mount Airy playground is a great example of community spirit.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

The Amish were on to something with barn raisings.

by Todd Woodward

A work of design contributes more to society than the monetary value of labor and materials. Published images of architecture portray design as an expensive commodity. Architecture publications and the popular press tend to reduce design to its pictorial qualities and to reinforce the myth of the star architect, a lone designer producing monumental works. The collaborative and social qualities of architecture are left unmentioned.

The "social life of design," however, is evident in the community-building potential of all construction projects. The complexity of construction projects makes them inherently collaborative: Very few projects can be designed and built by a single person. Even small works bring together people with varied talents and skills. The activity of building creates a group of people with ties to a project, a community that continues to grow as the work is experienced, used, maintained, refurbished and renovated. To speak of the social qualities of design suggests a responsibility to society that goes beyond service to an immediate client. Design professionals are uniquely positioned with the type of work that they do to engage *communities*.

In October 2002, dozens of people gathered at the Henry H. Houston Elementary School in Mount Airy to collaborate on a construction project. The project, not unique to the neighborhood, is a community-built playground. The "Playground Raising Project" was organized by a steering committee of local residents working with Leathers & Associates, an Ithaca, N.Y., firm that specializes in such projects. Although only two design professionals were a part of the volunteer committee, this project exemplifies the best qualities of the social life of design. Photographs of this playground will not appear in the pages of design magazines. The formal and visual qualities of this architecture are secondary to its social qualities.

During the planning of the playground, designers worked directly with the stakeholders in the project. Playground elements were selected, combined and modified to suit site- and neighborhood-specific conditions. Discussions with the volunteer committee, presentations to the larger community and workshops with students informed the design throughout the process. The students suggested alternatives and voted on a name for their playground, a significant act in creating a sense of stewardship of the place. The playground represents an imperfect work that resulted from a lengthy process of discussion and debate.

The social qualities of the design are also apparent in the construction details and the well-orchestrated building process. Each stage of the construction elegantly conceals and corrects previous errors and misalignments. The construction sequence allowed a lack of precision in locating supporting elements. Connections between members are often rough and unrefined, a virtue in a project built by volunteers of varying skill levels. Platforms were built, squarely, adjacent to the site and later attached to supports and to each other to provide solid and level surfaces. Roof structures were produced by a small team of skilled volunteers, ensuring a level of precision. Most components could be carried by one or two people, allowing many crews to work simultaneously. Identifiable elements within the design allowed groups of volunteers to develop a sense of pride in constructing particular sections.

This imperfect playground is more meaningful, both to the participants and to the larger community, than a project implemented without participation and compromise. That the project was able to overcome a number of challenges -- which included addressing a faction of neighborhood opposition; navigating the bureaucracy of city government; working with a school district undergoing a transition in leadership; major fundraising challenges; and, not least, inclement weather during construction -- adds significance to its existence. The project is enriched by these stories and given meaning by social events that surround the built work. One final point: At least four neighbors who formally



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ally contributed their time as volunteers during its construction. This is
e considered an exemplary project.

ion of the social life of design. The nature of this project -- volunteer
ns of the discussion. However, this social life exists in all projects.

Locally, the work of the Community Design Collaborative and even Amish barn raisings illustrate similar principles. And
the examples need not be limited to nonprofit works or vernacular constructions.

The highest function of design may actually be a social one: the building of communities of people. The construction of
the Houston School Playground will never be complete; annual work days will maintain the playground and sustain the
community's connection to it. I am obviously not proposing that all projects be organized and constructed following this
model. However, there is much to learn from a project that engages the imaginations and talents of so many people.
We must begin to recognize the social life of design in forms less conspicuous than a community-built playground. The
Playground Raising Project raises an important question: Is it even possible to create meaningful places without
understanding the social life of design?

*Todd Woodward, AIA, is a principal of Susan Maxman & Partners Architects, co-chair of the Community Design
Collaborative and a member of the Design Advocacy Group. Visit the Friends of the Houston School Playground at
www.houstonprp.org.*



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