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Dan Pitera

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AMPLIFYING THE DIMINISHED VOICE

Designing Space for All

By Dan Pitera

When we at the Detroit Collaborative Design Center view the ecology of the design profession, we see three glaring inconsistencies. First, too many architects are working for the few people at the top of the economic pyramid and only a few are working for the many people at the bottom. Second, the student of architecture and the recent graduates have a diminishing number of opportunities to gain experience in quality professional offices. Finally, too few firms working in the city of Detroit are thinking critically about the opportunities in the city and celebrating the citizens of the city. The structure and mission of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture are designed to address these three inconsistencies. To do this, the DCDC has modeled itself after a teaching hospital—a place for learning by doing, exclusively for nonprofit organizations. Students work alongside professionals, similar to how students work alongside doctors in a teaching hospital.

I would like to focus on the first of the three inconsistencies in these brief thoughts. Many underlying and subtle discussions are embedded in the lines that follow. They are presented to provoke thought and conversation.

We do not believe that architects are intentionally or maliciously working for the few and not the many; but we do think that in general, practice has strayed afar from its professional roots. *They do not have the money to pay for our services. If we include more people in the process, it will weaken the final product. There are so many other more important things they need before good design.* Such thinking restricts us to a certain way of working because it limits us to a certain way of seeing. The Detroit Collaborative Design Center attempts to alter this way of seeing and working.

A client who directs a free clinic for drug abuse counseling recently made the point that design is an issue of social justice. (For reference, the DCDC defines social justice as the distribution of both advantages and disadvantages across the full cross section of society.) Let's think about a walk down Adams Street from Union Station in Chicago. We cut through Federal Plaza in front of the Post Office at the corner of Adams and Dearborn. Pausing in this space, we see many people moving in many directions on foot, bike, skateboard, wheelchair, and shopping cart. People are standing and talking as others pass by them with just inches to spare. The ground of the plaza accepts all who enter. There are no

steps, no fences, and no bollards. Further down the road, we see another public space that has a barrier along the sidewalk. Where the barrier stops, steps lead down to the usable space. The plaza is primarily empty. It is a visual urban ornament. It looks like public space, but it does not act like public space. It does not accept the public.

One might say that building codes provide ramps and other amenities to help give access to more people. This is true. But they are only technical improvements. Visual clues can be designed to make people feel unwelcome even if the appropriate code elements are in place. Let's also be honest here. The people that these places are trying to keep out are those who push shopping carts. There are no code provisions for shopping carts used in this manner. This is an issue of social justice. True public space is to be enjoyed by the public at large—that includes people who use skateboards and push shopping carts.

The conditions in these examples could occur anywhere—from neighborhoods, to buildings, to landscapes. A place may appear to be open to the public, but subtle design cues can keep people out. The question then becomes: Who is left out of the decision making process? Where is their voice in this process?

The DCDC works to answer these questions. In a socially engaged practice, it is common to hear someone say that they are giving this person or this marginalized group a voice. At the DCDC, we submit that everyone has a voice. It is our society's power structure and cultural heritage that allow some voices to speak louder than others. The DCDC attempts to establish processes to amplify the diminished voice. With respect to the built environment, the DCDC works to bring this diminished voice into an equitable dialogue with previously more dominant voices. The DCDC engages the people who are often marginalized or underrepresented and bridges the gaps between people rather than further separating them. By amplifying diminished voices, other voices are not excluded; they are simply not the only ones heard. We work hard to widen the process to include all people, all programs and all places.

To view our projects, please visit our website at www.dcdc-udm.org ■

Dan Pitera is the executive director of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center in the school of architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy.