

DESIGN AS IF COMMUNITY MATTERS:
THE GULF COAST COMMUNITY DESIGN STUDIO
APPROACH TO COMMUNITY REBUILDING

A Research Paper

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Mark Torrey

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to challenge the widespread notion that “Humanitarian Architecture” can be a simple act of good will. Effective humanitarian work requires constant critique and self-reflection, backed up by values which are focussed on benefiting the community being served before all other goals, in order to deliver work which is sophisticated, nuanced, and appropriate to the situation.

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio (GCCDS) is a nonprofit architecture and planning firm set up in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to support the rebuilding of East Biloxi, Mississippi and other Gulf Coast communities. Interviews with staff members reveal a complex, critical, and analytical response to the act of humanitarian architecture and design. Their approach is informed by careful reflection on the experience they have gained working in response to the disaster in the years following Katrina’s near total devastation of East Biloxi.

This paper begins by looking at some of the historical background leading up to the storm and the formation of the GCCDS. It then reviews the theoretical background of Community Design Centers including some of the Studio staff member’s reflections on other organizations with similar goals, such as Architecture For Humanity, and the Rural Studio. It concludes with a discussion of the Studio’s conceptual methodology and a look at where the work is heading as the needs of the community change towards long-term development.

In the end, the viewpoints of the practitioners of the GCCDS become reflections on the larger fields of humanitarian design and charitable work in general, and suggest a shift in the values and approach taken to this work might be necessary.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mark Torrey received degrees in Philosophy and General Studies, as well as minors in Critical Discourse Theory and Computer Science, from Alfred University in 2000. He worked as a Computer Guy at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a number of years where he developed a sense of design and planning through osmosis. In addition he became an active member of the Boston cycling community in this period, contributing to his critical-analytical approach to the built environment and social justice.

During the summer of 2009 he interned for two months at the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio in Biloxi, Mississippi. There, he completed a GIS-based suitability analysis for the Studio to determine appropriate places for development along the Gulf Coast which took into account environmental respect and community needs. It is not this work but the connections and conversations that happened during this time that led to this paper.

Between 2008-2010 he attended the Cornell University department of City and Regional Planning, where he received a Masters in Regional Planning.

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INTRODUCTION

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio (GCCDS) is a non-profit architecture and planning firm located in Biloxi, on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. It was started in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 by architect David Perkes and demonstrates a number of qualities unique among architecture firms. Perkes had been working in community design organizations in various capacities for a number of years. Katrina's near-total devastation of East Biloxi created an opportunity for the Studio to do a large amount of work in a small geographical area. Perkes seized this opportunity to take a new approach to community design and humanitarian architecture, terming it, "An alternative practice."

This paper starts with the assumption that the GCCDS really does represent an "alternative practice" and that there are a number of aspects of the Studio which set it apart from other architecture firms and particularly from other firms practicing forms of humanitarian architecture. Primarily through interviews with the staff members, in combination with some of the staff's previous writings, and in comparison with other published materials on various forms of humanitarian architecture and community design, I intend to show that the GCCDS not only represents a different approach to architecture, but also represents a critical reflection of the state of the larger fields of humanitarian architecture and community design.

One of the GCCDS staff members Christine Gaspar¹ raises the question of whether the term "humanitarian architecture" is even appropriate. Some of the organizations which are most similar to the Design Studio have very little to

¹She actually left the GCCDS in 2009 to become the Executive Director of the Center for Urban Pedagogy in New York City.

do with architecture. For the purposes of this paper the GCCDS is generally considered part of “the larger fields of humanitarian architecture and community design” neither of which individual fields do they fit neatly into. The “larger fields” here essentially includes any organization shaping the built environment with social justice as a priority, but particularly ones that incorporate strong elements of design. Chapter 2 includes a look at some of the different types of these organizations, and Appendix B contains a list of related firms.

This paper began from a number of conversations, both informal and formal interviews, that took place at the GCCDS starting with the internship I did there in the summer of 2009. These conversations lead to the notion, in my mind, that the Design Studio was an atypical practice, even among the narrow field of “humanitarian architecture.” What started out as a simple case study of this firm, morphed into a critique of humanitarian architecture as I realized that I was too close to the staff members of the GCCDS to do a fair critical analysis of them, and also that I was much more interested in their views of the fields they work in. Or, to put it another way, how they see their work in relation to the rest of the world. The years I worked at the Harvard Graduate School of Design combined with the opinions of friends in the professions (some of them *extremely* critical of architecture,) with the result that by the time I went down to Mississippi I felt like I had a reasonable grasp of the work most architecture firms were doing. The GCCDS did immediately feel like a refreshing departure from the typical mode of architectural work. However, it was not until I was actually working at the GCCDS that I started to understand that there are significant differences even from firms that are considered similar to them, such as the Rural Studio.

With that in mind, this paper attempts to shed some light on what makes the GCCDS different. Which of those differences, if any, might be (or should be) reproduced elsewhere. And finally, what the practices of the GCCDS tell us about the larger fields of humanitarian architecture and community design.

CHAPTER 1
THE STORM AND THE DESIGN STUDIO

1.1 Katrina

Everyone knows the story of Katrina in New Orleans. It is easy to slip into hyperbole when describing the events of the summer of 2005, “The city of New Orleans was wiped from the face of the Earth by the anger of an Old Testament God” doesn’t seem all that distant from the reality that beset the city. The destruction was such that our narrative-seeking human minds cannot help but attribute some kind of preternatural anthropomorphized *wrath* to the storm. The storm tide caused Lake Pontchartrain to rise and overtop and breach the levees holding the lake back from the low-lying city. 80% of the city was flooded with water up to 20 feet deep, tens of thousands were evacuated, and 1577 people died in Louisiana.[Knabb *et al.* 2005, 11] One federal government report claims the population of New Orleans dropped from 470,000 to 100,000.[United States 2006, 9] The dramatic narrative of an entire city being destroyed (not some city in an impoverished continent on the other side of the world, but one of *our* cities) was irresistibly compelling to the national media, who descended upon the city during the otherwise slow news days of late August. At \$81 billion Katrina was the costliest (roughly twice the cost of 1992’s Hurricane Andrew) and one of the five deadliest hurricanes ever to strike the United States.[Knabb *et al.* 2005, 12]

Meanwhile, eighty miles to the east, Mississippians were frustrated that the drama of their own experience didn’t merit nearly the same amount of media attention.[United States 2006, 7] Perhaps due to the lower number of fatalities

(238 in Mississippi, 2 in Alabama). Perhaps because Mississippi lacked the controversial story of epic bureaucratic failures like New Orleans and FEMA, the Army Corps of Engineers and the levees. Or possibly because the storm damage occurred in small coastal communities that stretch for 90 miles from Louisiana to Alabama rather than in one geographically and culturally identifiable metropolis. Whatever the reason, the narrative of disaster in Mississippi never seriously materialized in the national media. For good or ill, the state was left to rebuild in the penumbra of the constructed media image of the rebuilding of New Orleans.

Yet, by some measures Mississippi was hit harder than New Orleans. Mississippi fell to the east of the track of the eye of the hurricane, in the range of the highest storm surge, reaching 34 feet in places and extending inland as far as 10 miles. While the surge to the west caused Lake Pontchartrain to rise, the damage New Orleans suffered was caused mostly by the flooding resulting from the failed levees. Essentially a result of human error. Winds during the actual storm reached category 2 (96–110mph) levels at most. The storm was experienced differently in Mississippi which took the full brunt of Katrina’s category 3 (111–130mph) winds at the time of landfall. Besides the high winds, the primary damage to the Mississippi coast resulted from the storm tide, a combination of the massive size of the storm surge and the unfortunate coincidence of its arrival at high tide. While Katrina made landfall at a lower intensity than Camille (the 1969 storm that devastated the Gulf Coast) it covered a much larger area.[Knabb *et al.* 2005, 9] With it came large waves, but it was the water level that rose like a high tide with no retreat which did most of the destruction. When the waters finally did start to recede, they reversed direction with equal intensity and sucked everything back towards the gulf. “Our infrastructure was devastated,” Gulfport Mayor Brent

Warr said, “The water came in, blew off manhole covers, then receded and caused a vacuum, sucking gators and DVD players and lots and lots of sand into water and sewer pipes. You couldn’t have backed a truck up to a manhole cover and dumped it in more effectively.” [United States 2006, 8] Entire communities—Waveland, Bay St. Louis, and Pass Christian—were wiped out, houses reduced to nothing but concrete slabs.

In addition to the physical devastation, the economies of these towns were pushed to the brink. Hancock County was estimated to have lost 64 percent of its real property value. In Waveland and Bay St. Louis that figure might have been closer to 90 percent. [United States 2006, 9] (See map, Appendix A.)

1.2 East Biloxi

East Biloxi is not an island. At least not literally. It is however a peninsula which is accessed primarily from one of two bridges, or through the narrow strip of land that is not occupied by Keesler Air Force Base. Keesler is nearly a mile across, occupying 70% of the width of the neck of land that makes up Biloxi. East Biloxi is the oldest neighborhood in the city. The 2000 U.S. Census listed its population at 12,702. One GCCDS study contains the details:

Generally, East Biloxi was home to an older, more racially and ethnically diverse population with lower incomes than in the City [of Biloxi] overall. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 26% of residents in East Biloxi were over the age of 55, compared to approximately 20% citywide.

The U.S. Census also showed 53% of the population in East Biloxi identified as White, 32% Black or African-American, 12% Asian and 3% Hispanic or Latino. The Census recorded 71%, 19%, 5% and 4% for these populations, respectively, for the City of Biloxi. The percentage

of homeowners was 46%, nearly equal to the City's count of 49%. The vacancy rate was 4% greater in East Biloxi (16%) than the City of Biloxi. The average family size was 3 persons for the City and 3.13 for East Biloxi.

At 24%, the poverty rate for East Biloxi residents was approximately 10% higher than the rest of the City. The average median household income was \$28,745, compared to \$34,106 for the City.[Warnke 2006, 16]

However these data represent the 2000 census which was becoming inaccurate even before the storm in 2005. The aftermath of the storm had a dramatic effect on the population makeup of the Gulf Coast. As a result, the Census Bureau released special population estimates of Harrison County, where Biloxi is located, showing a 16.5% population loss.¹ This number may not actually reflect the displacement caused by the storm, as significant numbers of people moved into the area to help with the rebuilding efforts.[Warnke 2006, 16] The presence of this rebuilding class has become deeply ingrained in the communities of the Gulf Coast. It would be a mistake to lightly dismiss them as carpetbaggers.

Following the storm, the city as a whole spent \$50 million removing more than 2 million cubic yards of debris from city streets.[City of Biloxi 2010] In East Biloxi it was estimated that approximately 80% of the housing stock in the neighborhood was completely uninhabitable along with over two-thirds of Biloxi's public housing units.[Warnke 2006, 17] For all intents and purposes, low-lying East Biloxi was nearly flattened.

Part of the work the GCCDS did was mapping and analysis to aid their partners in getting an accurate depiction of the neighborhood and target help to the areas that were in the most dire need of it. For each year from 2006-2008 the Studio gathered volunteers and staff to do a "boots on the ground" survey of East Biloxi

¹Coincidentally, almost exactly the same amount of population gained by Biloxi after the legalization of gambling in 1990.[Drobnyk 2005]

to visually and physically assess the status of residential and vacant properties. (See figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3) “The findings show that, while numerous homes have been repaired or built anew, the number of vacant lots continues to increase, and the number of remaining potential rehab projects has dwindled. The maps also identify what many on the ground in Biloxi have intuitively felt, the crucial lack of rental housing in the wake of Katrina.” [GCCDS Maps 2010] The Studio has also carried out community visioning, urban design, landscape design, and park design projects in a number of other communities along the Gulf Coast.



Figure 1.1: A figure-ground map of East Biloxi created by the Studio to show storm damage.

Source: [GCCDS Maps 2010]

Before the storm, Mississippi allowed offshore gambling. A number of casinos floated on dockside barges which the storm tide pushed up onto the shore. The state government, as if resigning themselves to let the casinos stay where they landed, passed legislation allowing an 800 foot “gaming” buffer along the edge of the peninsula.[Drobnyk 2005] Tremendous amounts of capital now flow to the

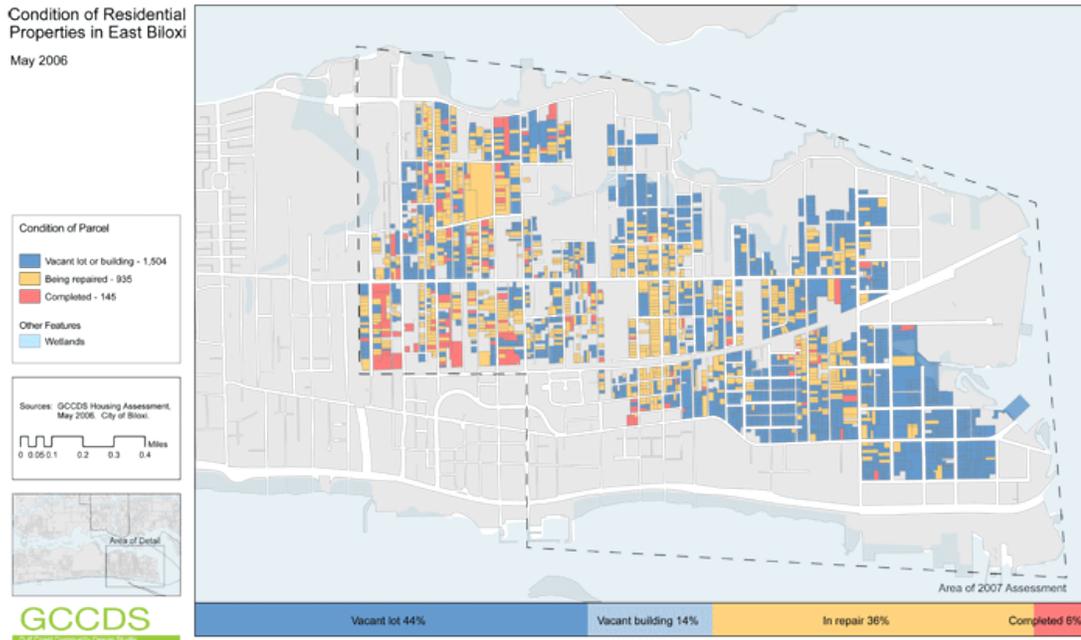


Figure 1.2: A map created by the Studio to show the condition of residential properties in 2006.

Source: [GCCDS Maps 2010]



Figure 1.3: A map created by the Studio showing flood elevations.

Source: [GCCDS Maps 2010]

edges of the peninsula as people come down from upstate to lose their money in the casinos of the “Redneck Riviera.” In response, the city builds manicured boulevards that guide the vacationer from the highway off ramp to the casino entrances and allow them to miss the insular poverty they are driving through. Meanwhile, a freight train carrying the weight of industrial, military, and consumer goods from Gulfport, the next coastal town to the west, passes through the center of the peninsula a dozen times a day sending reverberations through every home.

1.3 David Perkes and the Formation of the GCCDS

At the time of the storm, architect David Perkes was running the Jackson Community Design Center for Mississippi State University. There, fifth year architecture students, having left behind the main MSU campus in Starkville, spend their last year providing “research, visioning, planning and technical assistance” with a “mission to support urban revitalization.”[JCDC 2010] In the wake of the storm in 2005, Perkes left his family behind in Jackson and moved down to East Biloxi where he lived in a minor-league football stadium converted by the Salvation Army into housing for relief workers and volunteers. (The stadium became affectionately known by the workers as “Salvo”.) The MSU architecture program’s work in Starkville and Jackson up until that time was far removed from the Gulf Coast. Their decision to support Perkes and his studio in a new endeavor in a coastal community represented part of their contribution towards the effort to rebuild the parts of the state affected by the storm.

Perkes is unassuming. He is not a large man and doesn’t get his way with threatening behavior or even the presupposition of power. Rather the

opposite: he is respectful of other people as a rule and shows genuine interest in their perspective. He is polite and thoughtful and answers questions with careful consideration. James Wheeler, one of the Studio designers who has worked on a number of architectural projects, says of him:

Every time I hear David talk, I pick something new up. He says it so matter-of-factly. And I think that is a big deal. It is not about dumbing things down, if you do that to a community, you'll get zero response. What it is about is being aware of more things and listening more. That's something you learn being around David, because he will listen and distill things, and then repeat it back. He is reserved and has a quiet charisma, he has a trustworthy-ness.[Wheeler Int. 2009]

In East Biloxi, Perkes found an environment defined by the *paradigm of reconstruction*; a disaster area which, while not the blank slate that some might envision, was going to see a fundamental shift in the characteristics of its built environment. Guided by the unifying vision of rebuilding and fueled by the energy of volunteers hoping to do good, the paradigm of reconstruction allows manipulators of the built environment to practice their craft with rare untethered opportunity. Those with the skills to build find themselves with an ability to accomplish changes typically reserved for the most powerful members of a society. A chance is gained to demonstrate the value of their skills not only in the context of the paradigm of reconstruction but in the context of the culture as a whole. Any environment rebuilding itself from catastrophe is forced to bring to the surface the systems and influences that usually remain subdued and hidden. The GCCDS, along with many other firms in a variety of fields, took advantage of the paradigm of reconstruction to get an initial footing and then to build a viable practice with a substantial dose of experimentation. But even in this context of new-found freedom, the Studio always kept benefits to the community as the core of their practice.

A few weeks after moving to the Gulf Coast Perkes met Bill Stallworth, a city council member, who established a place the community could go to for help rebuilding or remodeling their storm damaged property.[Perkes 2009, 4] Stallworth's "Coordination Center" would provide a caseworker to any community member seeking help. The caseworker would arrange for financing of the project by combining the applicant's savings with insurance and grant programs (and any other available funding source.) The GCCDS, initially comprised of only Perkes, a few architecture students, and Jason Pressgrove, a recent graduate. In the early days they occupied spaces near the Coordination Center which were archetypical of the paradigm of reconstruction: "The first office was an AME church, the one next to Salvo, which had broken windows and a toilet that would back up all the time. Then we moved into a old Catholic Church in the beginning of May 2007."² During the paradigm of reconstruction, much of the Studio's work would consist of working with a Coordination Center client to individually design a home that met the client's needs and desires. Along with other staff from the Coordination Center, the Studio would also help with the management of the volunteer construction teams during the building of the homes. The Studio staff would often be intimately involved with not only the design, but also the construction of the home.

In many ways the Design Studio defines itself by its relationship to the world of architecture. Perkes is an academic architect, his papers are published in architectural journals, and he presents at architecturally focussed conferences. Most of the people who work at the Studio have degrees or experience in architecture. The image the Studio has constructed for itself is of an architecturally based firm that is willing to do any kind of work they might have the skills to accomplish. This means that most of the attention the firm generates is from

²Gaspar, personal correspondence.

their architectural and design services and from working with clients from the Coordination Center to rebuild East Biloxi and other communities on the Gulf Coast. And certainly, in the paradigm of reconstruction, the bulk of their work was architectural.

But even in the early days of the Studio, Perkes describes the gestures towards non-architectural work, towards just being useful:

A few weeks after the hurricane, acting as the founding director of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, I met Bill Stallworth and saw his hand drawn map with sticky notes hung on the wall that was being used to direct the work of volunteer groups. In recognizing this need I said, “We can make maps”, and a few days later delivered a stack of maps that were used for many months by dozens of volunteer team leaders to organize the cleanup and relief efforts of the area.

Such direct application of design skills to immediate needs was appreciated by the community. The grid map, as it came to be known, was a practical tool and the first of many maps produced by the GCCDS to provide useful information about complex issues such as flood zones, changing land uses, the impact of the devastation on Biloxi’s Vietnamese residents, the progress of rebuilding, and many other concerns. These maps require expertise as well as an attitude of usefulness to set aside a trained urge to design the future and focus on the current needs of the community.[Perkes 2009, 4]

In simplistic terms the GCCDS distinguishes itself from other architecture firms by making the core of their practice putting the needs of the community ahead of the needs of design. They know the background from which they came, the processes of conventional architecture, and put that aside to face the problems of the paradigm of reconstruction head on. Design skills are part of their toolkit for reconstruction, not the definition of their purpose.

After the Studio had been established, but while it was still a very small operation of only a few people, Christine Gaspar was hired. While working for a

more conventional architecture firm in Cambridge Massachusetts after graduating from MIT, she saw Perkes give a presentation at Design Corps' Structures For Inclusion conference. When Perkes described the work he was doing and the enormous space for architectural work that was opened up by the paradigm of reconstruction, Gaspar said to herself, "I can do that," and introduced herself to Perkes.

Christine Gaspar is tall and gregarious, intimidatingly intelligent, equally at home with critical academic theory and cheesy pop culture references. She is easy to like, but not afraid to be honestly critical. She brought a practical functionality to the Studio which allowed it to reach its full maturity and hire around a dozen designers.³ Gaspar had such an influence on the Studio that Jody Rader, a staff member who had been working for Perkes from very soon after the storm, demarcates the historical periods before and after Gaspar, joking, "I was B.C.; Before Christine."⁴

Gaspar added a file structure to the computer system that everyone could use, and she formalized sets of construction drawings, focusing on details she knew the Studio was falling short on due to her professional experience in architecture. She streamlined procedures and maintained consistency in client interviews, and describes herself as the person in the organization who would hold them to what they could actually accomplish. Gaspar was the person who said, 'No' when Perkes said, 'Yes' to virtually everything asked of them. She says, "Sometimes he would come back from a meeting, proud of himself for actually saying 'no' to a project." [Gaspar Int. 2009]

³Perkes is the only registered architect at the firm, everyone else has varying levels of design education.

⁴Rader was hired as a designer by Perkes very early on. She actually put aside the completion of her undergraduate degree in order to work at the GCCDS.

She suggests that these roles, where one person plays the visionary, while the other stays grounded in practical work, can be an important dynamic contributing to a smoothly running firm. With the needs of the community in mind, Perkes would sometimes over-eagerly engage the vast numbers of problems arising in the paradigm of reconstruction, while Gaspar kept them churning out productive accomplishments. The combination was a studio with an adroit effectiveness.

With Gaspar's influence combined with the incredible amount of work to be done, the Studio grew rapidly. The strategy for hiring people was not very sophisticated. Most would simply show up interested in doing work. Some had previously volunteered and then would return to be hired, like Rader, while others came down to visit with a school or to work with Americorps. Kristen Zeiber, a careful and reflective designer, hired by Perkes directly out of architecture school, had a professor who knew Perkes. She was hired over the phone. The nature of the place and the situation had a simple effect on who worked there: "For a long time people who wanted to come were the right people, they had the right attitude and that was self-selecting. If people were willing to work in that environment, then they were the right people to be there." [Gaspar Int. 2009] This changed somewhat after the Studio was featured in an article in *Architectural Record* in 2008. With more recognition the Studio needed to start becoming more selective about who they hired.

Perkes, conscious of how other organizations similar to his operate, deliberately worked around some of his perceived pitfalls to being an effective community design organization. He notes some of the problems of using volunteers: "There are many houses that were the object of an unskilled volunteer group that was allowed to do work that was poorly executed, not inspected, and ultimately needed to be redone.

The fact that the work is done by volunteers tends to excuse such shortfalls.” [Perkes 2009, 3] Perkes wanted to ensure that the studio work was being done by paid professionals, even if they were not paid directly by their clients. Gaspar concurs, “Our partners, the community, and the Studio itself do not see the work as pro-bono, and that is important to the work of the GCCDS.” [Gaspar Int. 2009]

Perkes’ solution to the two-pole dilemma of working for clients who couldn’t afford to pay them, and at the same time retaining paid staff, was to ensure funding from outside the community. Thus the Studio’s relationship with Mississippi State University became crucial, even when that was difficult to achieve. “The University would never be able to create this program from the top down. I have to push against the typical way they work on a regular basis” [Perkes Int. 2009]

Perkes secured funding from MSU partially by establishing the GCCDS as a research center for the university. This allowed the Studio to be largely funded externally, but this could be a complex process. Perkes pointed out that the funding for other research centers is much more straightforward: they have a few large projects with clear budgets. But the Design Studio necessarily works on many small projects simultaneously, and along with that goes a difficult array of funding techniques, all of which are typically sought out and managed by Perkes himself. “The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio architects, planners, and interns are able to become long-term employees and members of the community because they are paid. However, because the Design Studio support comes from grants and other funds outside the community, the people that are being served are not measuring the value of the assistance by a professional fee.” [Perkes 2009, 3]



Figure 1.4: A typical day in the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio.

Fundamental to the function of the Design Studio is this structure: income for the staff of the Studio is not dependent on the community itself. This allows the Studio to operate in the community both for the long term and without the obligation of a fee-for-service structure. In this context the Studio soon reached about a dozen staff members. During this period they remodelled hundreds of homes, and constructed about 30 new houses in East Biloxi.[Russell 2008]

1.4 Houses

After some time spent riding around Biloxi one can begin to recognize which homes were designed by the GCCDS. The first sign is that they are raised to FEMA's minimum flood height requirements for new houses. The homes stand on stilts of wood or poured concrete rising from just a few feet up to 12 or 15 feet

in a deep flood zone. They distinguish themselves from other new construction with proportional elegance: fitting well on top of their stilts, designed to be there. Other new homes simply look like traditional suburban houses jacked up 12 feet in the air; top heavy and piquing one's curiosity to see what the underside of a house looks like.

Closer examination reveals other conventions which have crept into the design of the GCCDS houses and Jody Rader describes the process by which some of these become the standard working order in Studio designs;

If you look very closely at our houses, they have—maybe not an aesthetic style—but a large number of components which they share. This happens through trial and error, and the fact that we all work in a studio where we don't have walls and we just go back and forth bouncing ideas off each other all the time. There are a lot of parts that maybe wouldn't show up in a photograph, but are pretty similar across the board. Like all of our houses are handicap accessible friendly, or they all have similar window cross-ventilation, nine foot ceilings, and no vinyl siding. A lot of things aren't our choices, but things we have gotten used to doing because volunteers build our houses. None of our roofs have a pitch steeper than 6/12 because that is the threshold of the volunteer labor liability. Small things like that work themselves into our house designs.[Rader Int. 2010]

Some of the Studio conventions affect the aesthetic built environment of Biloxi dramatically, and others are minor details found buried in the relationship between a client and an architect. But all are a fundamental part of what it means to be a designer. How to implement the specifics is the challenge a designer faces.

Houses were the core work of the Studio during the height of the paradigm of reconstruction in the years after 2005, though they did not actually build a new house until 2007.⁵ As increasing numbers of homes were built or rehabilitated by

⁵Gaspar, personal correspondence.



Plan

Figure 1.5: The plan created by the Studio for Patty's House.
Source: [GCCDS Building 2010]

the Studio, they started to impact the look and feel of the neighborhoods they worked in. They became features of the neighborhood and physical evidence of the presence of the Studio in East Biloxi. Some streets seem utterly transformed by Studio work, while others shift in subtle ways. If one house shows signs of improvement, perhaps that inspires others to improve as well.

Jody took me on a tour of the houses she finds most interesting. On some blocks we would stop at what felt like every house so I could take pictures. In some places, clusters of Studio projects would run down the block and around the corner. Jody pointed out that clustering actually happens due to the interconnected relationships of friends and family in the neighborhood. When one person had their house remodeled, they would tell their neighbors and the neighbor would then seek out the help of the coordination center and the GCCDS. The clusters



Figure 1.6: Olivia’s and Marlene’s houses together. Designed simultaneously by two staff members of the Studio, they are intended to be compatible together without ‘matching’.

would grow, and the specific attributes of individual houses needed to relate to each other as much as the general attributes related to the community as a whole. Figure 1.6 shows an example of this phenomenon at work.

The Studio refers to the houses by the names of the homeowners, some of whom end up becoming close friends of the Studio. Patty, the owner of “Patty’s House” (figure 1.7, figure 1.5) continues to drop by the Studio to say hello on a regular basis. She painted the pylons on which the house rests herself with images of water, sky, trees, and cats. Her house is LEED certified and designed by a group of Penn State students working with the Design Studio.⁶ The GCCDS web site describes Patty as “a great client,” perhaps the highest compliment an architect can pay to a non-architect.

Other former clients do not remain as close to the Studio. At one house we approached, the owners sat on the porch glaring at us, and Jody said regretfully,

⁶In an email to me, Gaspar adds, “The Penn State students came to us through Bryan Bell and Design Corps.”



Figure 1.7: Patty's House. LEED certified, designed by a joint effort of the Studio and Penn State students through a Design Corps program. The client painted the foundation herself.

“We’ll skip this one, they are not happy with us at all. They don’t distinguish between the volunteers who built their house and the Design Studio.” At another house a man came out to confront us, suspicious of my photography, but Jody’s easy-going style quickly convinced him that we weren’t there for nefarious reasons. One of the non-monetary costs of receiving a pro bono home is the possibility of many outsiders being interested in it for a long time to come. How much responsibility the owner of a recognizable home has towards community outsiders is a complex and open question.

Jason Pressgrove was another designer who pre-dated Christine’s arrival and had an influential effect on the Studio with an energetic body of work. His designs are found all over East Biloxi (figures 1.8, 1.9.) He designed the iconic “Tran House” (figure 1.10) located directly across the street from the Studio. Built for a local Vietnamese shrimp fisherman who lost both his house and his boat in the storm,[GCCDS Building 2010] it features distinctive design with a



Figure 1.8: Sherry's House. Designed by Jason Pressgrove, and inspired by mobile home design that she brought to the GCCDS. Elevated 5'.



Figure 1.9: Lee's House. Very typical representation of Jason Pressgrove's house designs. This is a common style found all over East Biloxi.



Figure 1.10: Tran House. Designed by Jason Pressgrove, and located across the street from the Studio. Elevated 13’

rainwater cistern in the center of the house for irrigation of agriculture on the property. Jody says of it, “A Studio favorite, probably the most controversial house according to the locals—everyone’s got an opinion on this one!” Perhaps as a result, *Architectural Record* chose the Tran House for the cover when the Studio was featured in their October 2008 issue.

Many of the residents of East Biloxi are elderly, and as a result the Studio designs often incorporate ramps, lifts, and even elevators. Jody pointed out small details she loves on ramps all over East Biloxi, like the one on Inez’ house (figure 1.11), designed by Kristen Zeiber. The ramp is fitted partially under the roof to function as a sloping side porch, and a wheelchair lift was installed thanks to a grant from the Red Cross.[GCCDS Building 2010] The ramp functions as a new type of transitional space, a grand entrance, and an architectural tool that reflects the needs of the inhabitant. Ramps might seem like an odd thing to get excited



Figure 1.11: Inez House, Designed by Kristen Zeiber. Featuring a combined ramp and lift to the side porch.

about, typically they are an architectural afterthought to meet ADA standards, but the needs of the community of East Biloxi have required Jody to spend much time mulling over their finer appointments.

The influence of the Studio spreads even beyond the houses that the Coordination Center and the GCCDS build themselves. The Studio supplied the local Habitat For Humanity builders, with whom they had often worked on construction projects in the past, with plans for homes with comparable costs to their standard constructions, but also designs which are much more practical and apropos to Biloxi (figure 1.12.) The Studio has almost nothing to do with these houses, but they look surprisingly similar to Studio-built homes. A testament to their functional and cost effective details. Good design follows along as a bonus.

One house that Jody showed me was “Hazel’s House,” which, since Perkes regularly uses it as an example of pragmatic architectural practice, has grown to near legendary status in the small world of the GCCDS. *Miss Hazel*, as Jody always



Figure 1.12: A Habitat for Humanity built house, inspired by GCCDS designs. Very similar to a nearby Studio house designed by Kristen Zeiber.

calls her—using the honorific given to women of a certain age and respectability in the South—was a client of Jody’s whose trailer home was destroyed in the storm.

She was disabled, not in a wheelchair, but she had a bad heart and was a chain smoker. To rebuild, she would need to elevate 14 feet. She couldn’t return to a trailer because it was no longer zoned for a trailer. From a case management point of view this was a funny situation because case managers are always trying to build back to what they had. But due to the law, Hazel was required to build to a higher standard.” [Rader Int. 2010]

The Studio did some preliminary drawings of ramps 200 feet long that would wrap around the house and then decided it would be more practical (or pragmatic) to simply sell the property to the city, which already owned the rest of the block anyway. The Coordination Center could then buy Hazel a new property in an area with lower flood requirements and the Studio could design a new house for her. However, the complexity of selling the old property and searching for new property dramatically slowed the process of getting Hazel into a new home. Adding

to the pressure to get the house built, Hazel’s daughter had been arrested before Katrina on a drug charge for which she was supposed to serve two months in prison. Following the storm, Hazel was living in a FEMA trailer park—which prohibits people on probation—thus there was no where Hazel’s daughter could legally be released to and she remained in prison for over two years.

Further adding to the complexity of choosing a new property was Hazel’s apprehension about living in a neighborhood she didn’t like. When they did eventually find a site that seemed like it would work, Jody and Hazel carefully vetted the neighborhood and met the neighbors to ensure Hazel approved of them. The new site still required the house to be elevated five feet, but the ramp was shorter and more manageable (figure 1.13.)



Figure 1.13: Hazel’s House. Built on a new lot purchased after selling the homeowner’s original lot to the city.

Hazel never saw the house completed however, about a month before it was finished, she passed away. Over the course of the extended time she worked with Miss Hazel to build her home, Jody had grown very close to her. “When she died,

it was one of those wake up calls. We had crossed the lines of the client/architect relationship, it had become real friendship. When she passed away, I was a wreck. I still tear up thinking about her.” [Rader Int. 2010] In the wake of her death, Hazel’s daughter inherited the house, allowing her to finally be released from prison.

About four months ago Hazel’s daughter called Jody. She was interested in selling the house. To Jody’s chagrin, she apparently does not like the neighborhood. “If she does sell that house, it will be the first GCCDS designed, volunteer built house that gets sold on the market.” [Rader Int. 2010]

CHAPTER 2
IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY DESIGN CENTERS,
PLANNING, AND ARCHITECTURE...

Community design is a hot field. On the 10th anniversary of Design Corps' *Structures For Inclusion* conference in 2010 many comments were heard regarding the growth from the humble beginnings of the conference to intense activity, interest, and sheer size.[Bell 2010] The desire to do *good* in the world seems to be a defining characteristic of this generation, possibly inherited from values instilled by their baby boomer parents, but acted on with a freedom from financial obligation (also instilled from their baby boomer parents.) Community design resolves the dualistic impulse of the up and coming generation to enter a field of community service and their egoistic desire to enter the "Creative Class."

Today's service organizations report staggering increases in applicants and participants. The number of volunteers serving abroad in the Peace Corps—over 8,000 in 74 countries—is at its highest in 37 years. Teach for America, one of the nation's largest non-profits, reports that its 2008 class of teachers is the largest in the organization's 18-year history by almost 30 percent. Similarly, YouthBuild, a non-profit in which low-income youth work toward their high school diplomas while building affordable housing, has had to turn away thousands of young people due to a lack of space.[Kroll 2008]

At the same time the urban theorist and public figure Richard Florida claims that 30% of all employed people belong to the new creative class which includes, "People in science and engineering, architecture and design, education, arts, music and entertainment, whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and/or new creative content." [Florida 2002]

Community design, which as a career offers the opportunity to express oneself creatively while bringing expertise and skill to low income and struggling

communities, combines the cultural cache of architecture with the self-effacing generosity and righteousness of a social worker. But community design wasn't always such a sexy field. Like many other progressive fields that have become integrated as part of normalized public service, it started as a response to dominating top-down policies of the 1950s and 60s. Reconciling its early reactionary stance with its present day cooptation as a mainstream tactic has become one of the primary struggles in the field today.

2.1 History of CDCs

Henry Sanoff (one of the figures at the forefront of the community design field for many years now[Toker 2007]) traces the history of Community Design Centers to the general cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Civil rights, women's liberation, the anti-war movement, and urban riots all contributed to the atmosphere of authoritative establishment power structures being upturned. Government and power bases at the time actively tried to address societal problems with expertise applied in a top-down fashion; the Supreme Court passed judgment, the president went to war, and planners carried out the strictures of Urban Renewal. The communities affected negatively by this atmosphere reacted with knee-jerk, rebellious, cause-and-response actions, which were often appropriate, but were weak in long-term tenacious effectiveness. Sanoff claims that this was due to a lack of common goals and wide-ranging attempts to deal with diverse issues, particularly in urban areas.[Sanoff 2000]

In an effort to channel the visceral energy of urban protests, the legendary community organizer Saul Alinsky mobilized groups around viable issues and

directed their efforts against clearly defined opponents. His work was grounded in *participatory democracy* and the construction of the binary opposition. For him, sheer numbers were the source of community strength. He would mobilize as many people as possible to pickets and rallies around a singular issue in direct confrontation with a vilified opponent. For instance, his three rules of power tactics:

- The first rule of power tactics: Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.
- The second rule is: Never go outside the experience of your people. When an action or tactic is outside the experience of the people, the result is confusion, fear, and retreat. It also means a collapse of communication, as we have noted.
- The third rule is: Wherever possible go outside of the experience of the enemy. Here you want to cause confusion, fear, and retreat.[Alinsky 1971, 127]

The goal of each discrete event was a positive result—a sense that the community had achieved some kind of outcome in its favor—which would reinforce the sense of community for a given group. For Alinsky, community organizers had a responsibility to remain external to the groups they worked with and were required to leave communities as soon as local leadership could be established. The organizer should remain a facilitator, educator, and advisor, but never become an integrated part of the community.[Sanoff 2000]

Feeling that Alinsky's methods were too divisive, some community organizers took up the cause of *advocacy planning* put forward by Paul Davidoff, who felt that it was inappropriate for planning to be a process of completing a unitary plan by a local government agency.[Davidoff 2000] Instead, planners should be advocates of the poor and less powerful, representing their interests in the face of plans being created by the wealthy and the powerful. They should become proponents

of participatory democracy to overcome poverty and racism.[Toker 2007, 313] For Davidoff a planner would act much like a lawyer representing his client’s interests. Each side in a contentious planning effort would have a representative planner who would argue for them in front of a planning commission which would weigh the merits of each, like a judiciary body. The result would hopefully be an impartial decision on how the built environment should develop. A negotiated outcome balanced between opposing sides would be the core agent of change rather than a distinctive victory.

The rise of advocacy planning formed the plinth underlying Community Design Centers, which in many cases acted the part of the advocate planner promoting the interests of downtrodden neighborhoods. Initially, during the 1970s, design centers worked with civic organizations that supported low-income neighborhoods to provide architectural and planning services. The idea was that the practical benefits of good design could be gleaned in these areas if graphical skills could be incorporated into the community development process. This has been identified as the “idealistic” phase of the history of CDCs—characterized by the use of available funding sources to mobilize opposition that was reactionary in tone.[Toker 2007, 314] The design centers brought design consciousness and technical planning skills into the mix of community organization tactics.

2.2 Attributes of CDCs

By the Reagan era, CDCs had moved into their more contemporary “entrepreneurial” phase—characterized by a pragmatic approach in an age of

conservative politics and reluctant funding. Sanoff lists the services provided by most CDCs as the following:

1. Comprehensive, participatory and strategic planning.
2. Technical assistance in the selection and financing of development projects.
3. Advocacy and support for the acquisition and management of housing and community facilities.[Sanoff 2006]

Sanoff conceives of CDCs as conceptually similar to Community-Based Development Corporations,¹ but with a focus on urban design and planning. The goal of these centers is to effect community-wide changes through a participatory process.

For the design and planning professions, community design centers have been the equivalent of what health clinics are to medicine and what legal aid is to law. People are served through pro bono professional assistance, but often after the injury has occurred. Long-term community-based planning and visioning processes require linkages between design centers and community organizations, with a full-time commitment to relieving distresses in urban and rural environments.[Sanoff 2000]

For Sanoff, CDCs are slightly distanced from architecture. They may hire or fund architects, but they are not fundamentally architectural in scope and approach. While Sanoff does include “architect-led non-profit corporations” along with “university service-learning programs” in his examples of CDC organizational structures, it remains clear that he sees the role of CDCs to influence design

¹The “CDC” acronym is conventionally used to refer to “Community Development Corporation” (It is of course even more conventionally used to refer to the “Centers for Disease Control” outside of the design field)—that is, non-profits performing community development work primarily through programs and service offerings. Sanoff tries to distinguish Community Development Corporations from Community Design Centers by re-branding them as “Community-Based Development Corporations” with the resultant acronym of CBDC. (Or even, CBDO with the “O” standing for “Organization”[Sanoff 2000]) Also, be careful not to confuse these acronyms with CDBGs, or Community Development Block Grants which are a major source of funding for many of these types of organizations.

decisions with a participatory process at the scale of the neighborhood or community, rather than a specific house or lot with an individual client.

Pinning down exactly what a CDC is and what constitutes the type of work they perform has been no straightforward task. There is a wide array of variation and experimentation with how these centers are organized and function. Some research has been done trying to categorize the types of work that might be called “community design.” Kathy Dorgan identifies six types of work done by CDCs:

- **Education:** Offering programs to educate communities and bridge the gap between research and practice.
- **Research:** Pursuing the questions generated by the practice of community design—possibly the fastest growing component in the community design field.
- **Project Initiation:** Working with members of a community to identify local needs and then find ways to address those needs.
- **Project Design:** Providing high quality affordable or pro bono design and construction services to a community.
- **Policy and Planning:** Generating proposals for local and regional planning and governmental policies through interactive community processes.
- **Design-Build:** Taking the design process through to construction, relying on volunteer labor and donated materials.[Dorgan 2006]

While these characteristics are attributed to all CDCs, many CDCs are associated with universities and have specific attribute unto themselves. Ann Forsyth has surveyed and identified several types of CDCs specifically associated with universities:

- **Research Center:** Focussing on work that systematically answers questions important to the field.
- **University-based Firm:** Covering planning and design work that parallels private sector consulting firms.

- **Community Advocacy Centre:** Similar to Sanoff’s descriptions of non-profit, non-university CDCs, the advocacy centers work with low-income and disadvantaged people in a participatory framework on housing, environmental justice and urban design issues.
- **Extension:** Employs professional agents to apply new research from universities to practice in the field.
- **Studio:** Work of the center revolves around a charismatic central figure with an inspiring vision.
- **Clearinghouse:** Focus on the distribution of ideas to the general public and organized groups.
- **Umbrella/Convening Organization:** Provide infrastructure-like support to a wide variety of independent researchers and outreach initiatives. [Forsyth 2006]

Forsyth analyzes the benefits and drawbacks of each of these categories and notes that while many CDCs will cover the work of two or three of these types, it is “conceptually impossible” for a center to cover all of them.

2.3 Architecture for Humanity

Architecture for Humanity[AFH: Homepage 2010] is an organization that has profoundly influenced the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio and the world of pro bono design in general. Their book, “Design Like You Give a Damn,”[AFH 2006] has become a classic of the field, and can be found on nearly every bookshelf of designers working for the GCCDS.² It is a survey of humanitarian design projects from around the world. Compiled by AFH founders, the husband and wife team Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr, it “Offers a history of the movement towards socially conscious design and showcases more than 80 contemporary solutions to

²To be clear, the definition of ‘profound’ does not necessarily mean positive. In an email to me, Mike Grote said of AFH, “As far as the Studio staff, you will find mixed feelings about AFH, ‘Design Like You Give a Damn’, and especially Kate and Cameron.”

such urgent needs as basic shelter, health care, education, and access to clean water, energy and sanitation.”[AFH 2006] It is a book that is intended to inspire the young and the eager with goals of solving the problems of the world. This book suggests those problems can be solved with design. And it *is* inspiring: the book contains dozens of clever solutions to intractable problems while maintaining impeccable aesthetic taste.

Founded in 1999, AFH now boasts a network of 40,000 associated professionals and 60 local chapters in 25 countries that act as liaisons between the local communities and the larger network. Along with a long list of awards garnered over the years, their website is resplendent with aphorisms purporting the power of design:

Design is important to every aspect of our lives. It informs the places in which we live, work, learn, heal and gather. We engage all stakeholders in the design process. We believe our clients are designers in their own right.

and

Design is the ultimate renewable resource. Join us in building safer, more sustainable and more innovative structures—structures that are assets to their communities and an ongoing testament to the ability of people to come together to envision a better future.

They claim to, “Channel the resources of the global funding community to meaningful projects that make a difference locally. From conception to completion, we manage all aspects of the design and construction process.”[AFH: About 2010] The public image they have created is the over-arching network connecting a variety of isolated design centers, studios, and renegade architects. Mike Grote, a designer

for the GCCDS who is also their construction manager due to his background in building, describes the space they try to occupy in the community design field;

For Kate, she saw AFH through the eyes of the Design Studio, or through the Rural Studio. To her, AFH was the next generation of the Rural Studio. Or the face of the GCCDS in the public realm. They see themselves as the franchiser of design studios around the world. They are creating this brand around the idea that this could be replicated anywhere.”[Grote Int. 2010]

In this role AFH provided some of the initial startup funding which allowed the GCCDS to hire its first intern. In the year following the storm they also implemented the Biloxi Model Home program, which brought in big-name designers from around the country to work on rebuilding homes in Biloxi.

The pilot program is unique in that it offers families the opportunity to work one-on-one with architects and design professionals giving them access to expertise and design talent. Using the latest in materials research, disaster mitigation and sustainable building techniques, we see this as an opportunity for architects to help set the bar for new construction in the area. These designs address sustainability not only from a material and energy use stand point but in a community development sense as well. Setting standards of design and construction at such a critical scale impacts the life of the community itself. By rebuilding responsible homes in a devastated community families have a real base for contributing to the reestablishment of their community, rather than just getting by until the next disaster.[Open Architecture 2010]

In addition to the GCCDS, designers that worked on the project included, Studio Gang, Huff + Gooden, Marlon Blackwell Architect, Brett Zamore Design, CP+D Workshop, and MC2 Architects. Many of these firms are well-recognized names in architecture.

Grote worked as the program manager on the Model Home Program for AFH as one of his first projects in Biloxi;

I came down here as an employee of Architecture For Humanity for the Biloxi Model Home Program, in the June of '06. We sent out a sort of glorified RFP with two lots that had elevations and a program including family size and all that. We initially had about 30 interested people which got narrowed down pretty quickly. Ultimately, we had 12 commit, and we gave them \$2000 for their troubles to come down here. Then we had this science fair-like presentation of models made for the RFP. Through that whole time we were finding homeowners and qualifying them for our program. We eventually had seven homeowners which ultimately ended up being fully funded. So, these seven homeowners were basically secret-shopping at the fair. Nobody knew who was a client and who was just a person from the street. It was fun to watch these high-end, hoighty-toighty architects deal with people from this neighborhood. The architects had to be on their best game, and they had to relate to these folks—keep the level of jargon to a level that wouldn't annoy anyone. Then we revealed who the homeowners were. Once we assigned a homeowner to an architect, they modified their design to fit the needs of their homeowner. Then we took the drawing and construction documents—David would be the registered architect if need be—and get the projects built.[Grote Int. 2010]

This early experience organizing and wrestling with the powerful forces that pro bono community design could unleash informed some of Grote's reflectively critical response to the field;

We built the initial houses relatively easily. The final two came from the highest-end architects. The ones with books and museum commissions. The ones who shouldn't be doing houses. They don't have the skill-set to understand how a house is built, and why it is cheap, and what is cheap about it. They are the quintessential problem-child of this good-design/good-will problem. I take some of the blame here. I was a little intimidated, I only knew who these guys through their books. Now though, I feel like, 'Well, anyone can write a book.' These guys are just feeling around in the dark and disregarding the goals of the program all together. Eventually these types of problems lead to me quitting the project.[Grote Int. 2010]

Grote alludes to the deep-pocket funding they had at the offset, which was largely from Oprah's Angel Network and secured by AFH. That initial funding

for the Biloxi Model Home Program eventually lead to more funding for the Coordination Center and the GCCDS:

AFH succeeded in getting a rebuilding grant from Oprah’s Angel Network for the coordination center. The funding, which covered some of the center’s operating costs, was used to create grants for construction—\$20,000 each for 75 houses. Additional funding was used to construct a group of model houses. Oprah’s Angel Network has been East Biloxi’s largest and most continuous source of funds for construction.[Perkes and Gaspar 2008]

The role AFH has had in the formation of the GCCDS has been debatable, but for good or ill they are responsible for much of the public perception of the field of community design. Much of the critique centers on the idea that community design should be about much more than public perception. James Wheeler says, “You come out of a talk by Cameron Sinclair, where he wraps up with the line ‘Design like you give a damn!’ and you leaving feeling on top of the f***ing world. But you need to do everything like you give a damn.”[Wheeler Int. 2009]

2.4 Rural Studio

Another major influence on the Design Studio is the now-legendary Rural Studio, a design-build studio of the Auburn University architectural program. It differs from the GCCDS in that it is an educational project which rotates through new students every semester. They work primarily in and around Newbern, Alabama, located in Hale County, about 150 miles from Auburn University. (See map, Appendix A.) It was launched in 1992, “To create homes and community buildings for poor people while offering hands-on education stressing community service.”[Dean and Hursley 2005] Since 1993, they have built structures with a high



Figure 2.1: Yancey Chapel (or, “Tire Chapel”): An early classic of Rural Studio architecture, built primarily from 900 tires.
Source: [Dean and Hursley 2002, 95]

modern aesthetic from local materials. Like the GCCDS, the Studio cautiously considers its place in the community: “The Rural Studio initiates its projects through carefully established partnerships with local nonprofit organizations and state assistance agencies, in order to ensure that projects meet the needs of the local community.” [Pearson 2002, 92] But the Studio has been working in Hale County for long enough now that they are in many ways an integral part of the community themselves.

The structures they build are fundamentally different from the staid and practical homes of the GCCDS, being visually arresting and iconic. Some of them have become regular features of survey books of architectural history (figure 2.1). They are intended to fit in with the local landscape as centerpieces that both stand out and maintain a dialog with the indigenous scenery. The Studio has

had a profound effect on Hale County and they have done much to promote the aesthetics of design in a community that otherwise might be unappreciative. “Initial suspicion of the ‘strange’ appearance of Rural Studio projects has given way to popular demand for and pride in their unique character and high design standards.” [Pearson 2002, 86] Rural Studio has often served as a ‘best practices’ model of service learning in architecture. They taught a whole generation of architecture students at Auburn University, and they have taught the communities of Hale County as well.

Most of the stories that have made this program legendary revolve around the founder, Sam “Sambo” Mockbee, who, sadly, died in 2001. People continue to write books and make films about him. It is difficult to find anything about Sambo short of a hagiography: “He was more fun and made me laugh more than anyone I ever knew. It makes me glad to see him receive so many accolades. He deserved them all. He stayed the course.” [Moos and Trechsel 2003] says his old friend G. Williamson “B.B” Archer. Mockbee emphasized the combination of architecture, pedagogy and social activism;

He began to be troubled by the inequities that still pervaded the South following the Civil Rights movement. The lingering awareness that his own life of opportunity was enabled at the expense of African-Americans in his community began to weigh on his conscience. . . He understood that ignorance of “the other” and economic disparity, rather than merely race, were the key characteristics that defined difference. [Moos and Trechsel 2003, 9]

In 2000 he was awarded a MacArthur “genius” grant and he is credited with initiating a fourfold increase in design-build programs at universities throughout the country. [Moos and Trechsel 2003, 8] His influence on the field of community

design has been profound. Mike Grote describes how personally influential Sambo could be:

I saw him lecture in my second year of architecture school, and it changed the course of my career, the way I see the world, the way I see architecture. Rural Studio is a beacon of inspiration, something amazing. I think there was a trust of his personality—and community acceptance is much more important than the students. Rural Studio is still chugging along even though Sambo's been dead for 10 years. It became its own entity beyond Sambo, as big or bigger than the architecture program it is a part of. And it still is that, it is the gorilla in the corner of the room.

For Grote, Sambo provided the real connection and integration with the community through his personality, but those aspects have weakened somewhat since his death;

The Studio functions, but if you look deeper, I think you will see problems because Sambo isn't there. It isn't because of the loss of Sambo's charisma with the students and the people who run the operation. It is because the community doesn't relate as well with the people who replaced Sambo.

Grote goes on to suggest that it is more than just the loss of the inspiring personality of Sambo, but also that the Rural Studio's fame, effectiveness, and power, that have created issues that need to be dealt with in their own right:

As someone who has been through Auburn, and gone through as the second generation, the offspring of the original Rural Studio, and seeing it through the veil of promotion—the PR machine that has become part of the Rural Studio—seeing things for what they are, you also start to see some of the things it is lacking.

They put their best foot forward, but if you go out there, there is a really big disconnect between the community and the school and the work and the students. It is understandable, each next class of students wants to outdo the previous one, the projects get bigger and bigger, and take longer to finish. It all boils down to the fact that the

students are the center of the Rural Studio’s practice. And *work*, as in rebuilding the communities we work in, is the center of the GCCDS’s practice.[Grote Int. 2010]

Perkes concurs, though he puts it in his more conciliatory phrasing, “The Rural Studio is a good place for students to go and experiment. They are doing real projects and getting things built. It is a good *teaching* program.”[Perkes Int. 2009] But in an additional personal correspondence with me, Christine Gaspar points out that, “They don’t deal with building codes or any of the real-world limitations that inform the GCCDS—and most people’s—work.”The Rural Studio students have the luxury of working in a nearly-perfectly antiseptic community design laboratory setting.

Grote takes a critical tack even regarding one of the key features the Rural Studio shares with the GCCDS: remaining in one place for a long period of time to facilitate community integration;

On the surface everything is hunky-dory, but in my personal opinion—and this relates to being embedded in one place for a long time—the work has become self-referential, and program-wise it has become self-referential.

The program has less to do with the community; the amount of pavilion and shade structures, and things that only go so far as community assets, far outnumber houses and mutual community buildings created by Rural Studio. I think what happened is, in a small county like Hale County, their capacity to help produce these community buildings is low, and their demand or need is finite also, which is why you see the reach go further and further. Being in one place can be as much a curse as a blessing.[Grote Int. 2010]

Gaspar adds, “It’s interesting, because the Rural Studio has new people in the same place each year, which is why they keep recreating the wheel. While the GCCDS being in the same place let us get deeper into the needs of the community.”³

³Gaspar, personal correspondence.

When talking to Kristen Zeiber about Rural Studio she acknowledges its influence in a different light. She notes that some of the classic Rural Studio-designed homes have become so famous that decades after construction people continue to traipse through homeowner's yards taking pictures. The work of the Studio was already radical; far beyond the syntactical experience of the people they were built for. To add to that an obligation to put up with continuing attention, and to unwittingly become a part of the PR image that Rural Studio constructs for itself—gentle as it might be—are real responsibilities which a recipient of design charity must be willing to accept. For Zeiber and the other designers at the GCCDS these issues are less about criticism of the Rural Studio than they are about raising their own consciousness in the work the GCCDS does now and in the future.

CHAPTER 3

AN APPROACH BASED ON VALUES

Talking to the designers at the GCCDS, it becomes clear to me that nearly all define their work in relationship to the framework laid out by the larger worlds of humanitarian architecture and community design. This is in large part because Perkes reinforces their position in these fields with studio-wide self-reflection and conversation. While not necessarily explicitly stating the Studio's place, the day-to-day work and conversation directly reflect the deep knowledge of, and external ties to, those larger fields. Some of the staff have worked for AFH in the past, and Perkes has been presenting at *Structures For Inclusion* for years. The designers at the GCCDS who didn't come up through Auburn University's Rural Studio typically still have some connection to it. Most have made a kind of pilgrimage to Newbern. Perkes is also on the board of directors of the Association for Community Design [ACD 2010] and has worked as a part of the community design field for years. Despite being young designers, many working their first job out of school, nearly everyone at the GCCDS has a fairly sophisticated understanding of the larger forces of the worlds of architecture, planning, and community design that function outside the Studio. In Biloxi, they sometimes feel isolated from that world and that isolation may be part of the reason that they can operate as an "alternative practice" as Perkes calls it. But another part of the reason arises from conscious reflection, that begins with Perkes, but seems to be a habit of nearly everyone who works there.

Perkes, typically in character, is not often directly critical of the techniques and practices of conventional architecture firms or traditional ways of practicing community design. In his pragmatic method he tries to glean what is useful and

helpful from those practices and adjust his own practice accordingly. However, in an abstracted way, the Studio's practice ends up being a critique of the larger world of design and architecture, and particularly of academic architecture. This is reflected even in the naming of the organization, Perkes says of the name, "I deliberately called it a "studio" and not a "community design center,"—they are somewhat different entities." [Perkes Int. 2009]

But how exactly does the Studio see itself compared to the larger field? There are a number of aspects of the Studio's working methods that are atypical, but interviews with staff reveal the distinctive aspects that they themselves feel are important, not just for defining who they are, but also for teasing out the most effective and humane tactics to achieve humanitarian design.

3.1 The Studio Model

In her paper "Urban Centers for Universities: Institutional Alternatives for Urban Design" [Forsyth 2006], Ann Forsyth identifies several models which universities use to work in urban design outside the university environment. One of the models identified is the 'studio' model:

Studios occur in the design field. This is different to a studio course but rather is a model where the centre reflects the ideas of a central figure and where students or staff are attracted to the centre in order to work within that framework. This can provide a strong and coherent focus that is attractive to many in the wider public. Such directors can inspire loyalty among key staff that can be contagious in a design setting. However, the focus on one person's ideas may also make it more difficult for the kind of interaction between different viewpoints which is one hallmark of the university. In such centres, much depends on the qualities of the key figure and whether he or she can provide intellectual leadership over time. [Forsyth 2006]

This description almost seems to have been written with Sambo and the Rural Studio in mind and David Perkes is also clearly this kind of influential figure, inspiring contagious loyalty among staff. But where Sambo seems to have been legendary and larger than life, Perkes comes off as reserved. Nadene Mairesse, a GCCDS staff member who does much community development work, describes him as “charisma without ego.”

I asked Perkes about the idea of the studio model, “That is something I wonder about, I don’t necessarily want to always be in Biloxi and I’ve watched other outreach programs come and go. Many of them are dependent on people willing to push up against rigid structures of Universities. It impacts the longevity of the program.” [Perkes Int. 2009] Mike Grote states Perkes’ position in the Studio more dramatically:

There is something to the power of the individual, it is so easily seen in sports, where you have elite athletes playing professional sports, and then there are one or two who are the elite of the elite—and they make all the difference—because they become these talismans who make it happen. I do believe Perkes is a bit of a talisman. . . On the surface, you might look at it, jokingly of course, as a “cult of personality” but I think it is more about “trust of personality.” The community acceptance is much more important than the “minions” of that personality.[Grote Int. 2010]

For James Wheeler, Perkes implements this charisma most effectively, not among the Studio staff, but among the partners the Studio works with; “I don’t think it is about David being a magnet for us, but being a magnet for partners. For him, the mission of the Studio is to be helpful, that is the way he explains it in every lecture he gives, and in every paper he writes.” [Wheeler Int. 2009] There is no doubt that Perkes is one of the central pillars around which the Design Studio is

built, but Mairesse insists they don't follow blindly, they each do their own thing, so influence may be chalked up to inspiration rather than dogmatic vision.

The GCCDS is one of the university based design programs which serve a secondary function of providing high profile projects the schools can use to attract students; "Attractive to many in the wider public" in Forsyth's words. MSU can point to the Studio as one of their outreach programs, listing the Studio's accomplishments on the School of Architecture's website[MSU 2010] along with their other research centers. But Perkes' prefers to make the educational role secondary, possibly limiting MSU's ability to leverage this angle.

For research centers, Mississippi State University lists an axis of values: teaching, research, and service. These values overlap, but don't map directly onto the values and working goals of David Perkes and the GCCDS. This has caused trouble for Perkes, "On occasion I have had to go over the heads of mid-level bureaucrats at the University, and get someone in a high position to convince people down the ladder that we contribute worthwhile research to the school." [Perkes Int. 2009]

The typical MSU research center has as a primary goal either teaching or research, while the GCCDS has shifted to focus on service. None of these axis are exclusive—they all overlap—but to force pedagogy to the back foot was a somewhat unique move for a research center. Doubtless the paradigm of reconstruction opened up opportunities for experimentation with the focus on service, yet the newly-forming GCCDS was not necessarily required to meet previous benchmarks for a MSU research center in their efforts to support Gulf Coast reconstruction. "The Design Studio mostly does research and service" says Perkes "and enough teaching to justify our existence." [Perkes Int. 2009] Gaspar added, "In many

categories we had things both ways... a practice-based studio model, grounded in theory and academic approach. The community never saw that, even though it was important to how we worked.”[Gaspar Int. 2009]

The issue of how to—and how much to—integrate students in a service-learning capacity is one of the guidelines that shapes the Studio. It was carefully considered when first organizing the Studio, and it continues to arise as an issue in how it defines itself and how it relates to the larger field, as Perkes puts it;

The role of the design Studio within the College of Architecture is an ongoing question, in my mind, in the dean’s mind, in the student’s mind, in the rest of the faculty’s mind. I probably very knowingly keep it an ongoing question. We could have set up the Studio as a student centered program, but we didn’t do that because the needs of the community were much more important than the service-learning opportunity for the students. MSU already has other service-learning opportunities, like the studio in Jackson which is what I was doing before I came down here.

The community here simply needed people to help get houses built. The program grew to a significant level of work and funding without the dependency of having students down here. It is strange to have a college program, run by tenured faculty, and I’m not even required to teach any courses.[Perkes Int. 2010]

Teaching is explicitly *not* the primary goal of the GCCDS. It is another tool they use to benefit the community. Where the Rural Studio and many other service-learning programs have the symbiotic goals of benefiting their community *and* the students, for the GCCDS community benefits come first, and student benefits follow after. The GCCDS has since its inception regularly worked with students for short periods of time, but the bulk of the work has always been done by the full-time paid staff members. Grote compares the GCCDS’s pragmatic focus on work to the Rural Studio’s central core of pedagogy. He points out that there are even pedagogical benefits to a work-based studio:

Students here step in and step out of the flow of work that is happening here, rather than creating a project or program for them to work on while they are here. We are most successful educationally when we drag the students along and they learn the real way things happen. When programs are focussed on student education as the highest priority, other things suffer. There is a product at the end of our work that people actually have to use.[Grote Int. 2010]

For Wheeler the educational mission of the Studio might be more about the education and professional development of the working staff members rather than students who come down from MSU:

It's not education in the sense of a nuts-and-bolts liberal arts education, but an education of how we can develop as young professionals in the community design field. Regardless of where we've come from previously, we learn to become community leaders and foster and engender those same types of relationships that Perkes does. He has that confidence in everyone, and that really shows in the relationships we develop with our community partners—as individuals beyond Perkes.[Wheeler Int. 2009]

It is not clear if this was an explicitly intentional goal in the organization of the Studio, or if it was one of the many benefits that arose from a practice defined by specific values. Nevertheless Perkes consciously recognizes this as a distinctive aspect of the Studio:

It is not unusual for an intern to find herself in a meeting needing to reassure a discouraged person who is in tears at the challenges and uncertainty of her life. Such experiences, multiplied over and over, shape the working environment of the Design Studio. The interns come to know, first hand, that architecture is not a self-serving pursuit, and that learning to work positively with people who are in conditions of uncertainty is a skill as useful as learning how to work out and dimension a floor plan.[Perkes 2010]

In an effort to resolve the question of the pedagogical function of the Studio, they are now experimenting with a one year internship program in public design,

combining work for the Studio with classes at MSU culminating in the award of a Certificate of Public Design. “The new internship program is an experiment that makes the university and the college happier because it makes us more of an institutionalized part of the university. It gives us a university program that fits into what we are doing, it is innovative, and other schools are interested to see how it works out.”[Perkes Int. 2010] This program would allow them finally have a clear pedagogical role, which may become more important to the Studio as the paradigm of reconstruction draws to a close.

3.2 Values

Many architecture firms develop a signature aesthetic style, achieved through experimentation with material and technique, which will distinguish their work and perhaps become influential on the field. Perkes, on the other hand, has tried to develop a signature set of *values* which ideally would become influential on the field. Perkes’ values have been analyzed and refined over the years, and he makes explicit efforts to assure that they are integrated into the work process of the GCCDS by writing about them and having discussions with the staff;

These meetings started with several “Super Value Meals” in which eating together was followed by sharing thoughts and concerns about values. Once these after-dinner conversations seemed to be getting slowed down by debate over the meaning of particular words, we all agreed to leave words alone for a time and to each do a diagram about values.[Perkes 2010, 6]

These diagrams (see examples: figures 3.1, 3.2) resulted in the conclusion that values are something which are not “owned” by a person, but shared by some people, and are perhaps influential on others;

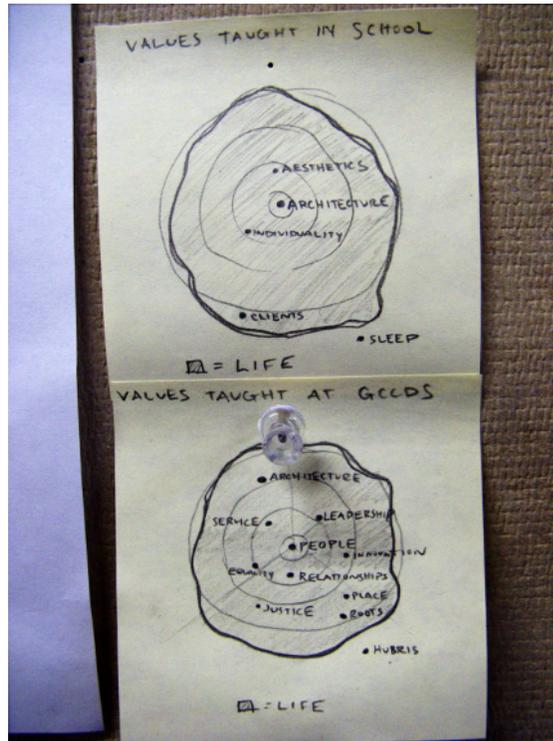


Figure 3.1: A values diagram pinned to the bulletin board at the GCCDS.

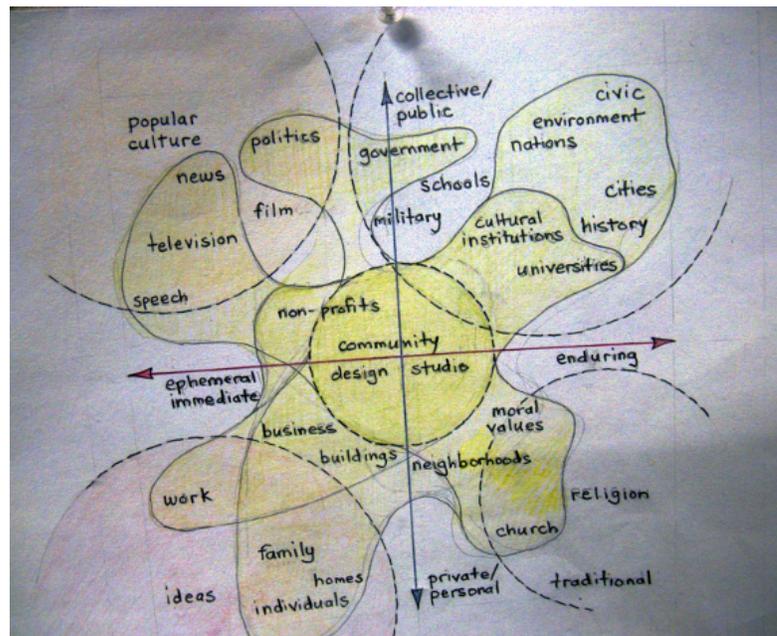


Figure 3.2: Another variation on a values diagram pinned up at the GCCDS.

At times values work like common framing tools such as a ruler, a square, and a level, to guide specific practical decisions. At other times values are aspirations to help us improve our work by being able to imagine doing things better. In either case care should be taken to avoid a possessive attitude that makes a claim that we own values.[Perkes 2010, 6]

He addresses three values in his practice: service, proximity, and experience, which he derives partially by reflection on conventional practice. Conventional practice's values are perhaps best summed up by the American Institute of Architects core values of "professionalism, integrity, and competence." [Perkes 2009] Rather than "core values," Perkes moves his values out to the boundaries claiming:

Any practice is shaped by values. These values form a boundary around the activities of a practice. The boundary extents delineate the range of activities, and the boundary definition describes the degree of separation between a practice and its social context. A conventional architectural practice is driven by profit and procedures that delineate a clear and well defined boundary around a particular set of established professional activities.[Perkes 2009]

The operational focus that Perkes contributes to the GCCDS lies in the intersection between the two sets of values above, but where he places his boundary values derives from sources that influence him and philosophical consideration. He is an architect and an engineer, but also from a Mormon background, and he is not afraid to quote the Bible as a source for the derivation of his values. One paper quotes Luke 17:10, "*So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded, you say, we are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.*" [Perkes 2009]

Perkes quotes John Dewey with veneration as well, "If values were as plentiful as huckleberries, and if the huckleberry patch were always at hand, the passage of appreciation into criticism would be a senseless procedure. If one thing tired or

bored us, we should only have to turn to another. But values are as unstable as the forms of clouds. The things that possess them are exposed to all the contingencies of existence.” [Perkes 2010]

But these influences are merely the starting point, Perkes has been refining his notions of these values for years in his conversations and writing. Kriten Zeiber told me, “If you read his academic papers in order, you begin to see a progression. His ideas and values coalesce and become more clearly defined.”

To detail the values that Perkes places on the boundaries of his practice: Service is, “Demonstrated in the activities of a practice, not in the compensation.” [Perkes 2009, 3] For Perkes, service is primarily about finding a way to be *useful* in practice. That is, when confronted with the post-storm situation, he looked for any work that his organization could do that would be of help. Although Gaspar notes;

The mapmaking and other stuff we did at the beginning are proximate skills to the main architecture ones. That showed the flexibility that we tried to achieve. But it’s important that we never tried to do the work of others, like the casework or the organizing. That’s a really important part of how we were different from groups like AFH that think architects should and can do it all. ¹

While many architects have the desire to work outside their expertise, the emphasis on usefulness and the downplaying of compensation is due to the Studio’s focus on keeping benefits to the community at the core of their work, whatever that work may be.

Proximity refers to to being as close to the community as possible. The GCCDS is located within the building of the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center, allowing them to be physically near the community they serve as well as to maintain

¹Gaspar, personal correspondence.

networking connections. This makes the work built on the third value, experience, easier to execute.

In this context, experience is the culture that is defined by sharing the struggle to rebuild this community. People have come together, in this specific place and time of Biloxi, Mississippi, and have created a connection by their physical location and work together building, with time, a culture of which the GCCDS is an integral part. Perkes quotes Dewey to clarify his notions of this value;

Experience denotes the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvest, the changes of night and day, spring and autumn, wet and dry, heat and cold, that are observed, feared, longed for; it also denotes the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices, hopes, fears, plans, invokes magic or chemistry to aid him, who is downcast or triumphant.[Perkes 2009, 7]

Perkes has developed a conceptual framework for the work that he does, which is a layer abstracted from more mechanical day-to-day operations of the Studio. He struggles to externalize his values and philosophical approach so that his work can be replicated, and to be able to instill those values into the Studio so they would be maintained if he were to leave. Those values and philosophy drive the operational and design choices that the Studio makes and within that framework experiments in *how* to actually work. Those kinds of experiments in a more conventional firm might form the basis of their work, they may become the publicized projects a firm is known for, and they develop an expertise at doing that specific kind of work. For Perkes those techniques are simply tools that might be tried in the service of their values. This raises the question: does Perkes think about the work the Studio creates in terms of recognition by the larger architectural world?

If the GCCDS says it has values that are different, values that are not about making a profit, where does that show up in the work? I

look for and expect differences in the output of the work itself. The consequences of the values we work from should show up in work we do, and they should be different than the elements of typical progressive architecture.

Any good architect will meet program and push the aesthetic qualities of their work. This is not the place that the GCCDS is really looking for. We want to be in a place where the work is so broad and in so many different efforts that it is not defined by one house, per se.

We have done over 100 houses, solving a variety of problems. We are on the trail of doing so many projects in a small geographic area, that they start to have an impact on the whole community, a spread out, diverse impact. Not *just* highly publicized projects, but a whole practice.[Perkes Int. 2009]

The time the GCCDS staff members spend doing the work of the Studio contributes to the development of their values. The growth and development of values through their work has more influence than any kind of direct imposition of values from Perkes. As a result, the emphasis on values manifests itself uniquely for the individual staff members, even while they retain similar goals. The explication of these values represents the output from the constant self-reflection and consideration that is a central part of the working model of the GCCDS. For Perkes this also represents the key effort to export the GCCDS working model so that others might follow it.

3.3 The Missionary Position

The motivations behind a person's decision to do work in the paradigm of reconstruction are multiple and complex. The tapestry of reasoning is deeply wrapped up with infinite variations of stimuli which lay at the root of our humanity. As mentioned above, we know that there are simply many young people with a

strong desire to do good work in the world. The desire to do good combines with the desire to do work that is creatively fulfilling, and the result is a large number of people who arrive in the paradigm of reconstruction with preconceived notions of what their place will be in it. Mike Grote sees the prevalence of this characteristic in some of the projects he worked on before the GCCDS:

There is this design snobbery that comes with these higher profile projects, the ones that make high design the centerpiece or the goal of the project. They are saying to the client, “I’m going to give you this really precious thing, and your life will be better for it.”

And that is one thing that is really frustrating because there is a richer, more important, more realistic design that I feel is *good* design, which I think we are trying to master in the Design Studio. That doesn’t rule out aesthetics or our understanding of that discipline, but it also doesn’t say that what we build has to be sexy to be successful—which often comes with a price tag that burdens the homeowner in the long run, rather than helps them.[Grote Int. 2010]

The notion that the pro bono work of an architecture firm is “good” work typically remains unchallenged and not critiqued. It is “free” work and therefore it is good in the minds of these young designers. I ask Grote if working at the Studio ends up disillusioning the eager young students with these notions, “Even the students who drove me crazy, and who were high maintenance, who I let loose on, and who at the time you think: Oh, you are never going to hear from them again—they all want to come back.”[Grote Int. 2010]

However architecture is not the only field where motivations and desires remain uncritically in place. It is an issue that has entrenched prevalence among charitable and humanitarian work, particularly in the paradigm of reconstruction. Kristen Zeiber in her first year at the Studio used to joke with Christine Gaspar about “The Missionary Position”—religious groups that would volunteer for rebuilding as a way to evangelize. She wrote about it on her blog at the time, “The problematic

associations [arise] when a team of white evangelicals come into the house of a black family and intimate that the only reason said family got their house built is because said family is Christian.” But Zeiber points out that this tendency spreads beyond religious groups:

Here’s the thing about the volunteer groups, too, even apart from the religious question: we love them, we couldn’t build as much as we do without them (which is of course *everyone’s* primary goal, getting people back into their houses), but everyone comes down for a week and wants to make a difference. And they do; of course they do, but in the little ways, and occasionally their desire for grand gestures comes across as slightly insulting, or more often just frustrating.

One group evangelizes, while another hangs a giant American Flag on a recently completed house, assuming the homeowner would appreciate the show of patriotism. Zeiber feels that everyone who comes down to work, perhaps unavoidably, seems to be responsible for some amount of objectification of the people they are trying to help. For most religious groups they are doing God’s work, for some volunteers it is their patriotic duty, and for some architects it is their sense of humanitarianism. For all, it is difficult to make a jump from an object of charity to a person with whom they have a real relationship. Awareness of this, and attempting to mitigate for it, are at the core of the difference between just doing pro bono work, and working for the benefit of the community. “Everyone reads what they want into poor people,” says Zeiber “It is easier to give charity than be charity. And I think we don’t give these folks enough credit for their grace and humility.”

In a conversation with me, Zeiber described the struggle as a designer to have a relationship with a client which minimizes the imposition of her own notions of class and aesthetics:

For me, for us, as designers, coming from an academic architectural background, with the ideas of taste that we have been trained to appreciate, it can be difficult to understand the tastes and meanings of a class of people from a completely different background. A house that is small, efficient, and *cute* to me, for a low-income person might have the meaning, “I’m not well off enough to own a house as big as all the homes in the neighborhood around me.” I have a responsibility to be aware of what the significance of my designs are to a client.

I point out that she also has a responsibility towards the larger cultural prerogatives of our times, towards sustainability and efficiency, that maybe some of her responsibility is to *educate* the client (and the neighborhood), “That is an incredibly tough decision to make, where to draw that line.”

There is a difference between a generalized educational move that aims to make cultural shifts, media campaigns for instance, and the imposing of educational agendas on a person who is merely trying to rebuild their lives. Once again this is, “reading what one wants into poor people.” The architect and rebuilding volunteer are primarily working at the intervention level of the individual. However, the Studio has often used that individual work as grappling hooks into the neighborhood to begin to effect larger social and cultural change. As the paradigm of reconstruction draws to a close, the Studio finds itself doing more work at this larger scale, while trying to still remain grounded with individualized projects in the community.

3.4 From Rebuilding to Development

The most shocking thing is that it actually worked: by most measures, volunteers and church groups actually *did* rebuild the Gulf Coast. In 2007 I went

down to Mississippi with my father's church helping to rebuild houses. It had already been a year and a half since the storm, I could not believe how much devastation there still was. The community consisted of little more than buildings reduced to rubble. Lots wiped clean except for the slab-on-grade foundation, downed trees, high water marks on houses still standing, and people who had been living in trailers for far too long. It seemed as if hardly any work had been done at all. I stood in a house with no interior walls which my dad's church group was working on. There were five of us volunteering there, only one of whom had any clue what he was doing. That man patiently waited while a well-meaning elderly gentleman with three fingers and a palsy tried to drive drywall screws with a screwgun. Feeling completely useless, I thought to myself, "This is hopeless, there is no *way* this place will ever get rebuilt." And I meant "place" in the much larger sense than just that one sad little house.

In 2009 I returned to the Gulf Coast for an internship at the GCCDS, and I was astonished at the improvement. The volunteers and church groups had done it. The Gulf Coast is hardly a reconstructed paradise, but projects for the lingering volunteers to work on are becoming scarce. The base level of the physical environment has been rebuilt, and people are back in their homes. Most of the actual labor that accomplished this was motivated primarily by the desire to do good in the world. And now there is a sea-change happening in the Gulf Coast. Vast improvements still need to happen, but improvement now means economic development and long range planning, rather than the kind that comes from a big-hearted volunteer swinging a hammer. Perkes describes this phenomena:

Our role in East Biloxi has been shifting. We have much more work with Biloxi Housing Authority. We are working with them on larger projects that are multi-unit housing and mixed use housing. We are about to start doing work with the City of Biloxi re-working some of

the dead areas of downtown Biloxi. These things are an evolution of a role that is changing as the neighborhoods and the communities we work in begin to get past the more immediate needs of just getting people back in houses.[Perkes Int. 2010]

The GCCDS has always done some planning work, like the mapping and housing surveys. Previously it supported their architectural work, but that work addressed the community's needs at the time. Mainly the need to re-establish people in their homes and community. Now the needs of the community are oriented toward hope for the future rather than the destruction of the past, and the focus of the Studio has shifted primarily to the work that addresses the future: planning and development. They continue to do architecture and building, but that work now supports their planning work. Perkes says:

Our work in Gulfport is in my mind our most representative work. It is not as focussed on Hurricane-related work—the neighborhood of Soria City was not even that much affected by the storm. In Soria City we have a range of partners and projects, the combination of which we have been able to use to put us into the community in a multi-dimensional way. We have the City of Gulfport, with the Mayor's Office and Planning Department working on a community they had already identified as a community they wanted to pay some attention to. We have Habitat For Humanity that also had their eye on this community, and wants to come in and do some houses. We also have a few houses by way of the Long Term Workforce Housing Program, which we do all along the coast, but these houses become important because the community can say, "Oh, so you are the ones who are working on so-and-so's house"

Perkes continues:

To be able to say, "We are here to do something more than just plan," builds a lot of trust in the community. We have several houses, one with the Coordination Center, and a couple more with IRD which are just in this mix. We have helped the city work out some zoning, going through the planning commission, we are working on streetscape improvements,

and as Habitat gets ready to do houses, we will help them. It is this long-term multi-dimensional effort.[Perkes Int. 2010]

As always, the progress and work of the Studio is informed by past efforts and the larger fields, while at the same time remaining distinctive;

It is following some of the other examples of community design, but it is not the same. I know this because I know people all around the country in the community design field. I have decided we are most effective when we are able to develop these multi-partner, multi-dimensional, multi-layered roles in a community, and just keep moving along and knowing that as we do so that we will have landscape, and planning, and building projects that will continue to develop.[Perkes Int. 2010]

However, while keeping the tie to architecture and local community may be critical to the function of the Studio, as Perkes suggests above, the individualized architecture work is also what gives them a foothold in a new community they are working in. Jody Rader calls it the distinction between “absolute” and “relative” work;

I think it is imperative to note that the Studio works because of that house work. I don't think you could replicate the Studio somewhere else, outside of the context of a devastating disaster. It is unfortunate, but it would require some other method to achieve what we do with our “absolute” work—which is how I describe our planning work—and our “relative” work, the work on individual houses.[Rader Int. 2010]

She also points out that there are sometimes more practical on-the-ground benefits to working from the relative to the absolute;

In Soria City I had two clients through two different building organizations, but in the same neighborhood. They had similar site issues; they needed a variance, their lots were narrow, and they were in a state historic district.

Because *they* had the same problems, we started looking at the whole neighborhood and realized that everyone in this neighborhood who tried to build would also have these same problems. So we now have ongoing work where we got the zoning changed to allow for shorter setbacks—actually throughout the entire city. Those two houses really informed the planning work we have been doing for the entire neighborhood.[Rader Int. 2010]

One way in which Christine Gaspar ties the absolute work to the relative work is by emphasizing the graphical skills they bring to their planning and development work, and how those skills can help empower communities:

Clients of course have agency in the recovery process. Our planning work was often about helping communities to have a visual representation of their ideas or take on redevelopment—how to give them a visual voice of their views of their community. Many aspects of community development are trainable, whereas design may be different because it requires a set of expert skills. Some design skills are trainable too of course, but most communities don't have people who can just draw up a rendering of their imagined community and throw it in the ring.[Gaspar Int. 2009]

Every developer comes to the table with powerful graphics in hand. So a key function of the planning work of the Studio, and of community designers in general, is to provide the graphical skills to the community that might not otherwise be there.

But Perkes reinforces the difference between the GCCDS and other design centers, to stress that design is one tool, community participation another, and working with the local government as much as community organizations yet another;

As much as I know it is needed and important to figure out how to provide design services and design representation to low income communities and minority communities, I also realize that the world

of subsidized, assisted, and non profit work is this complex multi-dimensional world.

I don't think it is effective for a CDC to simply be a voice for a low income community. If all a CDC is doing is representing, or providing design assistance to those who normally don't have those things, they are falling short of the opportunities that come if you actually learn to work as much from the top-down as from the bottom-up—working as much with other organizations as with the city to begin to connect up and work from both directions. To do that means we are not simply there to get the community's voice. That's part of what we do, but that is not all we do. We are often sitting in a top-level administrative meeting with people around the table trying to get them to figure out how they will shift their funding from this program to another program or to do something else.

Perkes continues:

At the same time we are not doing that simply because a low income community needs that assistance. It is as much about a *physical place* and thinking, “OK, here's a place that needs help; vacant property, storm water problems, inadequate infrastructure, declining property values.” You look at the symptoms of the conditions of a place and address them by bringing the tools of design. My experience has been that if you simply start with a bunch of people coming to meetings and asking them, “What do you want in your community?” It doesn't really help that much.[Perkes Int. 2010]

Even Sanoff nowadays has his doubts about the effectiveness of participation. He says, “Participation has become a tool for defending exclusionary, conservative principles rather than for promoting social justice and ecological vision. Professionals need to assume a new proactive role that distinguishes them from their more traditional counterparts. The new professional needs to employ a visionary approach that allows a community to expand its vision through participatory processes.”[Sanoff 2006]

Sanoff's “visionary approach” is simply a way of saying that community development is too complicated and sophisticated a process to be addressed with

a single tool like participation or architecture—it requires someone who functions at the level of the artist, not the technician. There is no right or wrong technique, or good or bad tool. There is only the application of the correct tool or technique to achieve goals consistent with sophisticated values that genuinely seek the betterment of a community. Perkes tried to explicate his values as a way of passing on a non-technical approach to community development work. But it may be that it is really a function of having the opportunity to work with him that truly transfers the subtle complexities of the job.

CONCLUSION

For all the unique qualities of the GCCDS, I would hesitate to call it revolutionary. The real revolution is in the larger fields of humanitarian architecture and community design. These disciplines arose from counter-culture roots of the 1960s, and still represent the alternative to traditional architecture and planning. Many of the Studio's techniques are careful and time-honored practices of community development. Instead, the Studio represents the refining of these tools, taking advantage of a disaster to practice the techniques of the field which keep the focus on the community, and possibly redefining what "humanitarian architecture" means in the process.

This paper shows that the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio is motivated to work as an "alternative practice" by three primary characteristics: working within the paradigm of reconstruction, a conscious awareness of the methods and goals of others doing similar types of work, and charismatic leadership. These characteristics might provide the motivation for an alternative practice, but the working methods that arise from this motivation are the aspects of the Design Studio which make it unique. The working methods are also the reason the GCCDS functions as a critical reflection on the larger fields of humanitarian architecture and community design, as well as charitable work in general. The methods mentioned in this paper include: using individualized architecture to make inroads into a community, maintaining a close proximity to a community (both physically and through networking with local organizations), pragmatic and functional design taking priority over aesthetics, a focus on working from defined values, remaining cautious of objectification of clients, and the necessity of self-reflection, among other methods. The primary goal that surfaces over and over

again at the GCCDS is to keep benefits to the community at the forefront of the work.

Making benefits to the community the focus of the work may at first seem like an obvious goal common to all humanitarian architecture projects. But the practitioners at the GCCDS suggest in this paper that competing priorities can often diminish those community benefits. For the Design Studio, the difference between architects and planners who want to solve problems through *design* and those who want to solve problems in a way that best suits the community arises repeatedly; it is epitomized by comparison with their co-practitioners. David Perkes points out that Mississippi State University has their own goals of research and teaching as well as service. And Mike Grote suggests that Rural Studio may have shifted focus so much to service learning that they have significantly watered down the benefits they bring to the communities they work in. At the same time, James Wheeler admonishes AFH to ease their attention to public perception of humanitarian design and instead “do *everything* like you give a damn.” It is possible that the interviews conducted for this paper have brought to the surface a criticality inherent to the work of the Studio that often remains an unspoken subtext due to Perkes passively diplomatic demeanor.

Combining their understanding of the larger fields with careful self-reflection and evaluation, the staff of the Studio try to avoid repeating mistakes perceived in other organizations. Perkes’ values are derived from this process, but the Studio staff functions under this awareness more generally. The result is a recognition that the fields of planning and design are heavy with the egos of practitioners, and humanitarian-oriented professionals are not excepted. This is what Grote calls the “Good Design/Good Will Problem.” This is not to say everything the GCCDS is

perfect, but merely that critical self-reflection is necessary in humanitarian work due to the inherent complexity and nuanced sophistication required to be sensitive and effective. Kristen Zeiber says in an email to me, “We are continuing to come back to these ongoing questions, which allows us to constantly retool our own approach and practice.”

If there are fundamental flaw in the GCCDS methodology, it is that the effort to maintain flexibility to address community needs may contribute to a lack of accountability. If each designer is dependent on a set of values, whether trained, inherited, or learned, that designer’s work cannot be measured against a specific code or even a specific aesthetic criteria. The designers are in some ways expected to be self-motivated and self-correcting. It is possible that “benefits to the community” is simply too abstract of a goal, or one that allows so much flexibility that it might easily be corrupted. The Studio’s solution to this is self-reflection, but that requires a moral standard that may be met individually and internally. Unfortunately these standards are difficult to externalize or pass on to other organizations.

Much of the ability of the GCCDS to remain focussed on community benefits stems from working within the paradigm of reconstruction, which provides a heavy lever with which the Studio can move obstacles to their goal. However it remains up to the Studio practitioners to decide how to apply that lever. The paradigm of reconstruction is one of the key reasons the Studio can move from “relative” to “absolute” work as Jody Rader puts it, or from rebuilding into development. The opportunity to rebuild so many homes in such a small area as East Biloxi could easily have been snatched up by an organization more oriented towards service learning, or avant-garde design. But in the body of the GCCDS’s work one sees

the pragmatic qualities of the structures, both in design and materials and also in the sheer volume of the work. And Perkes expects to see a different quality to the work because of this, as well as work that has impacts on the community as a whole.

The question that we are left with is: how much of what the GCCDS does is replicable? This is difficult to answer due to the fact that the Design Studio methods deliberately shy away from being pinned down to specifics, in order to maintain flexibility in achieving their goals. It is further complicated by the fact of working in the paradigm of reconstruction, and by the question of just how much the Studio is dependent on the charismatic figure of David Perkes. Perkes' efforts to ground the Studio in values rather than aesthetics or method is a deliberate attempt to communicate a way to reproduce the effects of the Studio's work that does not depend on specific functions. He hopes this will allow the Studio to be replicated elsewhere, but also to carry on without him should he leave. But some of James Wheeler's statements suggest that the best hope for replication might come from the training the staff receives and from their experience working at the Studio. Many of those young designers hope to later go into the world and start similar organizations elsewhere.

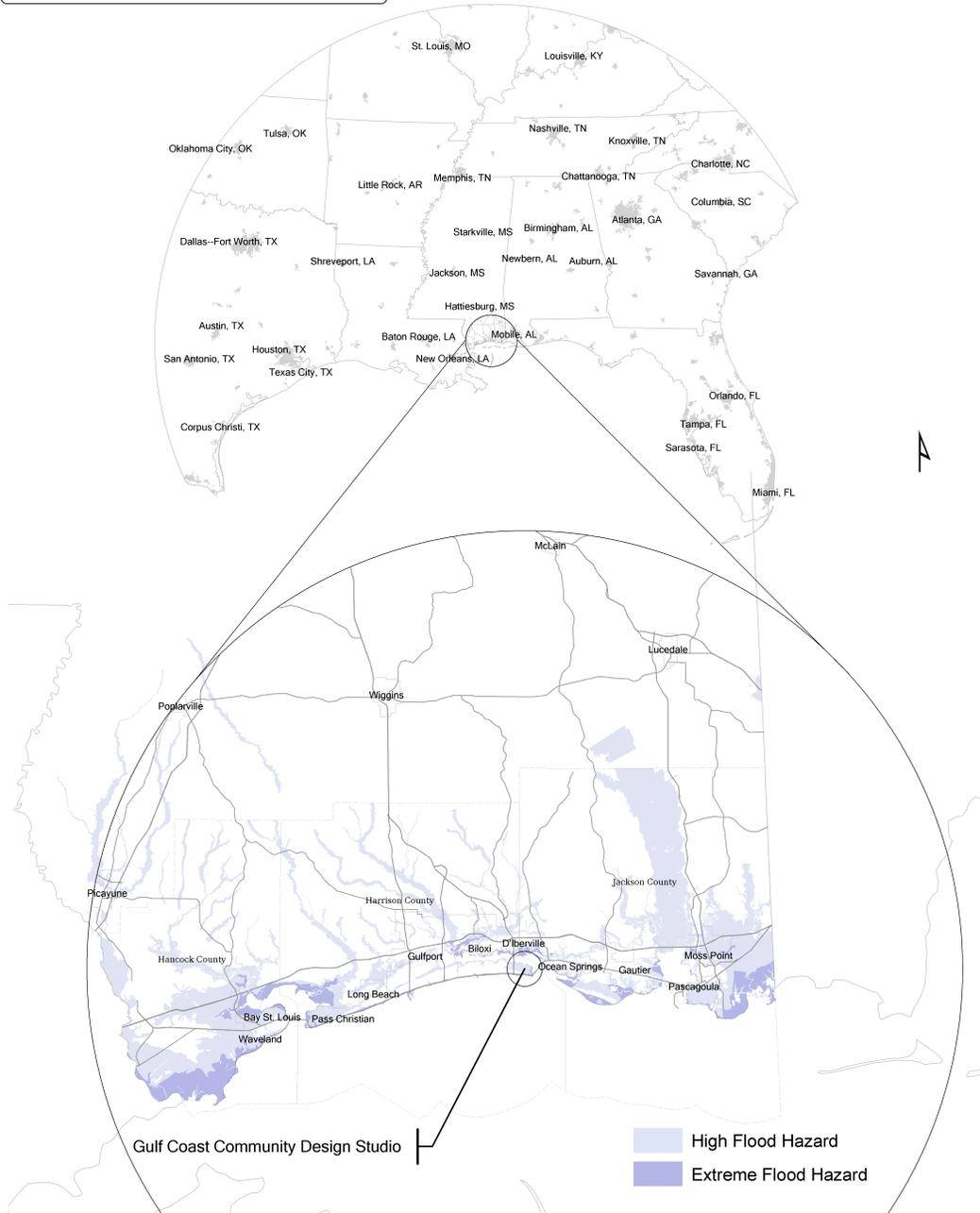
Providing help (and *receiving* charity) is not a simple task, despite what well-meaning ambitious young people believe. It is instead a complex overlapping mesh of sociological impulses representing desires and needs, both on the part of those receiving help and those providing it. Developing the sophisticated set of skills necessary to navigate this realm successfully may depend on experiential development combined with a robust set of core values. It is possible that the GCCDS represents a singular instance of place and people, but I personally believe

that the future will bring us a number of spin-off organizations which have their roots, directly or indirectly, in the work, methods, and values of the Design Studio.

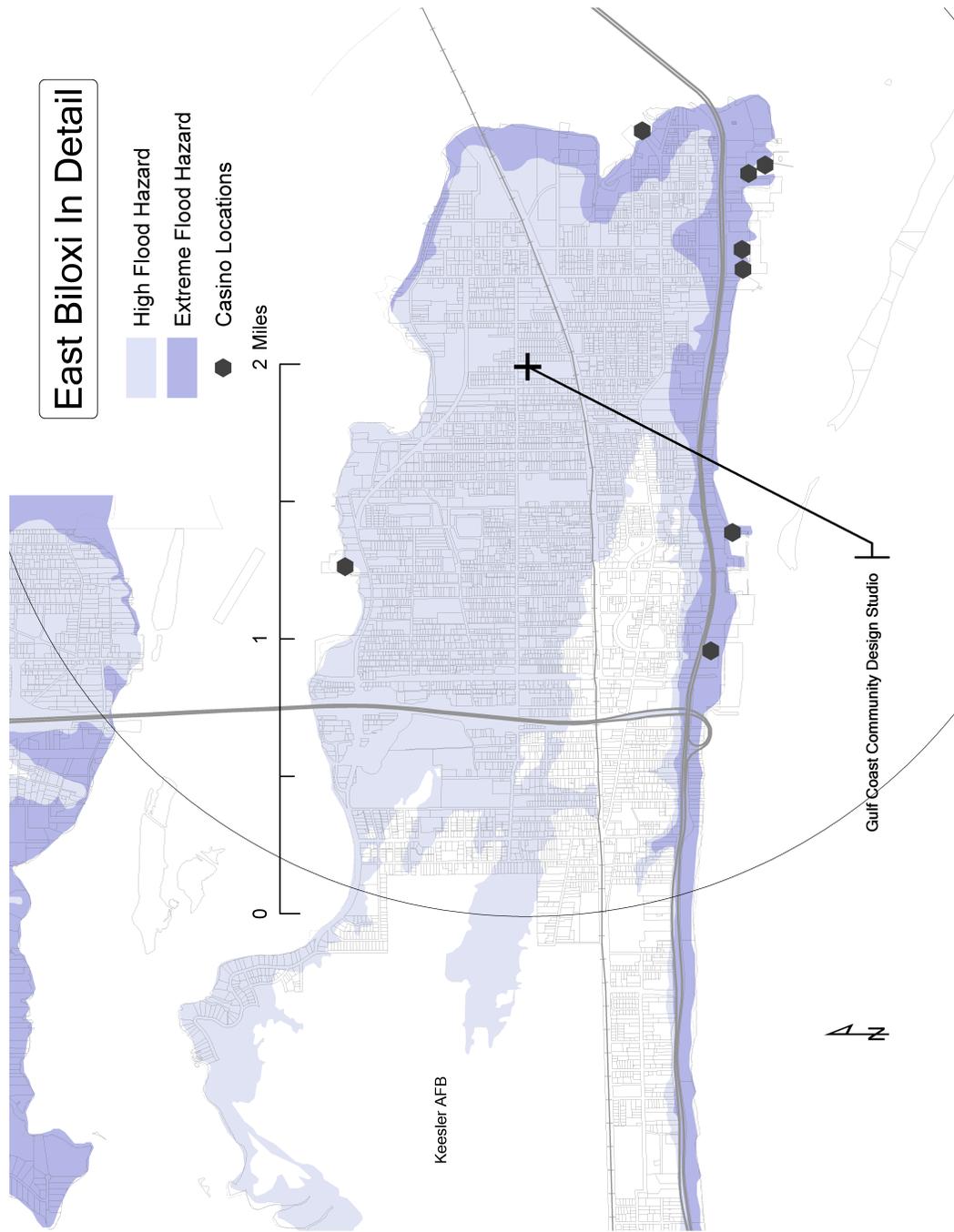
APPENDIX A

LOCATION MAPS OF BILOXI

East Biloxi In Context



East Biloxi In Detail



APPENDIX B
SURVEY OF DESIGN CENTERS

A partial list of other organizations working in the larger fields of humanitarian architecture and community design, and links to their websites. Some of these organizations are associated with universities. Some provide design services to those who would otherwise be unable to afford such services (or may not seek them out in the first place.) And some are more oriented towards planning and community development. It is difficult to specify qualities they all share, but these are the types of firms that are typically discussed in the literature of the fields.

- **Community oriented architectural organizations:**

- East Tennessee Community Design Center
<http://www.etcdc.org/>
- Design Coalition of Madison
<http://www.designcoalition.org/>
- Environmental Works
<http://www.eworks.org/>
- Troy Architectural Project
<http://www.tapinc.org/>
- building/community WORKSHOP
<http://www.wix.com/bcworkshop/bcworkshop>
- Community Design Collaborative of AIA Philadelphia
<http://www.cdesignc.org>
- Design Corps
<http://www.designcorps.org/>
- Howard S. Wright Neighborhood Design/Build Studio
<http://courses.be.washington.edu/ARCH/hswdesignbuild/>
- Studio 804
<http://www.studio804.com/>

- **Community oriented planning and urban design organizations:**

- Metropolitan Design Center, University of Minnesota
<http://www.designcenter.umn.edu/>
- Nashville Civic Design Center
<http://www.civicdesigncenter.org/>
- ASSIST Inc., Salt Lake City
<http://www.assistutah.org/>
- City Design Center, University of Illinois at Chicago
<http://www.uic.edu/aa/cdc/files/home1.html>
- Community Design and Development Center, Cincinnati
<http://www.cddcinc.org/>
- Pratt Center for Community Development
<http://prattcenter.net/>
- Community Design Center, Pittsburgh
<http://www.cdcp.org/>
- Charlottesville Community Design Center
<http://www.cvilleddesign.org/>
- Yale Urban Design Workshop
<http://www.architecture.yale.edu/udw/>
- Stardust Center for Affordable Homes and the Family at Arizona State University
<http://stardust.asu.edu/>
- Asian Neighborhood Design
<http://www.andnet.org/>

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