

Operative Practices

Toward an Inclusive Theory of Practice

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Published as the concluding postscript to *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service through Architecture*, edited by Bryan Bell (Princeton Architectural Press 2004). The book profiles architects and designers working to provide design to the chronically underserved, particularly the poor. This essay suggests a new terminology of operative practices to characterize the innovation which this work represents.

The projects and ideas documented in *Good Deeds, Good Design* are inspiring examples of a vitally important, but frequently overlooked, area of architecture: innovations in practice. The impact they achieve goes far beyond the inclusion of underserved populations in the roster of clients benefiting from architectural services. They also represent the inclusion, in the strategic repertoire of designers, of a wide range of activities that significantly broaden and deepen the possibilities of contemporary architectural practice. These activities range from community organizing to political advocacy, from volunteer fund-raising to strategic leadership.

This expansion of the scope of architectural practice is based on a shared recognition of the inadequacy of conventional design strategies and practice models to address the full complexity of contemporary social, political, and environmental challenges, particularly among economically challenged communities. Conventional design strategies and practice models are simply insufficient instruments for achieving meaningful social, economic, and political change in many complex contexts. At the same time, these new strategies highlight that the design process can be a valuable platform from which to deploy other strategies that are effective, either independently or in conjunction with traditional design strategies.

The projects documented here are innovative not only for innovations of materiality or program, but also for their unique modes of practice and production. They offer a rare window onto contemporary advances in the critical area of strategic architectural practice, advances that are relevant not only to the specific challenges of community-based design, but to the broader practice of architecture and design, generally.

This points the way to a standard of comprehensive excellence in architecture, a more demanding, -measure by which to evaluate the achievements of designers and their work. For these projects go beyond the physical innovations in form, material, and technology, or even the programmatic innovations in representation and use, which are the dominant subjects of contemporary architectural discourse. Without in any way sacrificing excellence in these conventional registers of architectural quality and innovation, they achieve, at the same time, a multi-dimensional, strategic *excellence in practice* that raises the bar for all architects and designers.

Programs like Archeworks, the Atlanta CHRC, the City Design Center, Design Corps, the Hamer Center, the Nirmithi Kendras, the Outreach Studio, the Pratt PICCED, Project Row Houses, the Rice Building Workshop, the Rural Studio, the Small Town Design Center, and the many others documented here act as agents of change by mobilizing innovative strategies not bound by traditional definitions of design. The architects and designers who lead these efforts do not worry about whether or not what they do is architecture, whether or not their strategies are design strategies, or whether the product of their work is embodied in built form, but pursue whatever combination of means are available to achieve change in a given context. Their work is more than just an assembly of alternative practices; it is a contribution to the increasing diversity of strategies available to all architects for the achievement of excellence in design.

Defining Operative Practices

As a tentative contribution to the appreciation of such strategic innovations in architectural practice – an effort pioneered by Robert Gutman in *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* and furthered by the work of Dana Cuff in *Architecture: The Story of Practice* and Diane Ghirardo in *Out of Site*, I offer here a new terminology, "operative practices," to link parallel architectural

strategies of formal, programmatic, and tactical innovation. Simply put, operative practices are intentional, creative actions – formal, programmatic, fiscal, functional, physical, social, political, aesthetic, and otherwise – that achieve positive, lasting change in a particular context. The definition is deliberately broad, and could be usefully applied to work of any profession or discipline that aims to transform the world in positive ways. But it has particular relevance for the work of designers, whose operative practices can be discovered in the moments where the process and/or products of design engage existing contexts so as to transform them in concerted, critical, and positive ways. Echoing this book's title, operative design practices produce results that not only look good, but do good, too.

My purpose here is to nudge our collective conversation about architecture toward a critical language that is inclusive, in the spirit of this publication, of the diversity of approaches and priorities which are demanded by the increasingly complex design challenges faced by contemporary culture and community. By opening the profession to these complexities, operative practices realize architecture's latent potential to vitally engage a community's social organization and cultural identity. In so doing, such practices – and the critical language that describes them – enable us to assess, compare, and value innovative achievements across conventional categories of physical form, social use, and professional practice.

By reframing the value of design, architects can expand the definition of creativity and innovation from the physical products of design to include the dynamic relationships that are created between those products and their systemic contexts. A new understanding of design practice as a vehicle for operative practice focuses attention on the ways in which a design of any scale – from consumer product to urban plan – affects in substantial ways the physical, cultural, historical, political, and economic systems in which it is engaged. Operative practice suggests a model of design that engages the boundaries between objects, agents, and contexts, insisting that the ambitions of a designer lie in the creative restructuring and reformulation of these boundaries themselves.

Operative Practices at Work

Successful operative practices are therefore vital to the achievement of broad social objectives, approaches to be deployed frequently and strategically by individual, government, non-profit, and for-profit agents alike. It is in this light that I would characterize the great significance of the projects and ideas documented in this book.

In the work of Roberta Feldman at the City Design Center in Chicago, for instance, the practice of design, driven by strong mission of social justice, explicitly aims to restructure relationships between those who make community design decisions and those who are affected by them. The context on which her practice operates, in other words, is the political process itself, and Feldman evaluates her own success and failure by the degree to which she is able to effectively transform this context in meaningful ways. The successful brokering of an accord between competing CDC's during the development of the Chicago Imagebase project, for instance, represents a powerful demonstration of the transformative impact of the work of the City Design Center on its local context, and therefore a fine example of excellence in operative practice. Similarly, when her ambitions for transformation are thwarted, in the suppression of their development report for a small Illinois town, her frustration is at their collective failure to make an impact on the political process in the town, the failure to operate effectively on her

chosen context, the failure to achieve excellence in operative practice.

Other examples in this book document attempts to simultaneously transform multiple aspects of the contexts on which practitioners work are clearly documented. At Bayview, Maurice Cox, RBGC, The Nature Conservancy, the EPA, and their partners from within and outside the Bayview community, by deploying a range of traditional and non-traditional design and non-design strategies, endeavored to achieve lasting, systemic change in the multiple physical, cultural, political, and economic systems that affect the village and its residents. The existing conditions upon which they sought to operate included physical challenges (lack of running water, unsanitary toilet facilities, leaking buildings, poor stormwater management), political challenges (lack of political leverage) and socioeconomic challenges (poverty and loss of livelihoods), and their approach was appropriately multi-dimensional and complex. In fact, of the array of strategies described by Cox, very few were oriented toward the development of a physical plan for the village, but all contributed in targeted ways to the remediation of systemic challenges facing the village. I suggest these strategies as examples of operative practices by virtue of this plural, systematic approach.

Elsewhere, innovations through operative practice are most evident in transformations of traditional modes of design service provision. In the work of Archeworks, Design Corps, the Rural Studio, Studio 804, and other education-based design initiatives, the systemic context upon which the respective practices operate is often the anonymous, standardized processes of government low-income housing and service provision, and specifically upon the failure of these processes to accommodate many individuals' and families' specific needs. In response, each of these organizations has developed a unique, replicable model of design service provision for this population by strategically coupling government and non-profit funding with the talents of student designers or design interns in a streamlined, low-cost design process: a new model of practice in response to a unique political and economic context of need. Though the process of design service provided in each case is perfectly consistent with traditional approaches to private design practice, their innovations as operative practice lie in their singular methods of funding and delivery, not to mention their transformation of the traditional model of architectural education and internship. An even more stringent measure of their success may be their ability to transform the larger systemic context of funding and delivery on which they operate, for instance through incorporation of the "Direct-to-You" strategies developed by Design Corps into the same Federal systems of low-cost housing provision to which they currently present a minority alternative.

Finally, in the work of Scott Ball at CHRC in Atlanta, I perceive two examples of emergent operative practices. First, in Ball's work as Director of Emergency Repair at CHRC, his "ishy" approach to nudging and tweaking emergency repair projects represents a strategic operation on traditional expectations for design excellence. In other contexts, settling for a house that was sturdyish, flattish, or straightish might be seen as a failure in construction standards or political will, but Ball's insistence on these "ishy" solutions as successes in the context of affordable housing in the City of Atlanta, by altering the standards of success themselves, actively alters the conditions in which he works, and thereby creates more quality affordable housing for less capital cost. Ball's new partnerships with building product manufacturers can be interpreted as a second example of operative practices. By carving out a niche for CHRC in the design of showcase projects that include new building products in an affordable housing

context, Ball not only enhances the willingness of affordable housing providers and consumers to consider new and innovative design solutions, but also builds interest in the product manufacturer community in the development of new products for affordable housing markets, operating simultaneously on the expectations of housing providers and product manufacturers. In both cases, Ball's ability to create alternative definitions of quality and innovation in response to local particularities leads to a transformation of the very context in which he works, thereby meeting his own challenge to "act as the architects of our own professional reinvention."

The Opportunities of Operative Practice

It should be clear, from these diverse examples, that operative practices, whether deployed by designers or others, will always be locally specific and necessitate a constant reinvention of the criteria by which we judge design excellence. In each case, where some might see substantial, positive change in existing contexts and systems, others may see a negative persistence of the *status quo*. But such potential difficulties in application of the terminology are the very basis of its value. Individually disagreements will arise over whether a particular project or strategy can achieve lasting, positive, cultural, physical, economic, or political change in its context, but the value of operative practice lies in its insistence that the ambition for such change is a worthwhile and legitimate ambition for design practice, and that our assessment of design excellence must include this debate.

If use of the term opens up the field of possible action, allowing us to argue, not about whether or not we are entitled to say, "I am an architect", but about whether we are entitled to say, "I am an agent of positive change", not about whether we meet *status quo* standards of design excellence, but whether we achieve change that is meaningful by standards appropriate to a given context, then it may provide us a framework on which to predicate action, and it may represent a true structure for inclusion in the spirit of this publication.