

A Synergy of the Physical and the Social

Q: How do the built environment and community development merge into a new planning approach?

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In many planning schools around the country, community development occupies a distinct and separate part of the curriculum from physical planning and urban design. In the UCLA Department of Urban Planning, we have brought these fields together in a unique synergy. The Built Environment area of concentration has been historically conceived to integrate social and physical issues, to examine how communities affect space and how, in turn, spatial attributes impact communities. This dialectical emphasis on communities and space breaks the artificial separation between the physical and the social, the aesthetic and the political, and gives us a more complete understanding of the city, the neighborhood, the block, and the household.

The work of the faculty and students in the urban design, housing, and community development streams is driven by certain axioms. We see community development incorporating both social and physical goals. Many student and faculty projects are driven by a desire to work with communities to create more meaningful places and social territories. But we know that meaningful places are culturally bounded; they are informed by past histories, but are also determined by present needs, realities, and

values. Meaningful places are never completely built or created, but can be changed, adapted, reused, and reconfigured by their users. Meaningful places establish links and connections to other places, neighborhoods, and communities. At the same time, meaningful communities can arise from conflict, negotiation, and mediation over use in a process where all the different stakeholders can participate.

The spatial emphasis of our work leads us to examine how space is produced, occupied, restructured, manipulated; how different needs and values are expressed in the urban form; how spatial attributes can support, enhance or inhibit social activities. The user-focus of our area of concentration urges us to work with various groups, learn from them, and in return, suggest ideas and ways by which space can better fit their needs. This philosophy of community involvement and empowerment is clearly at odds with the concept of the planner or urban designer as an expert.

The interrelation of the social with the spatial has led to a mutual appreciation of the different fields that inform our discipline. Those of us with design backgrounds have learned to evaluate the social and political impacts of our work. The social scientists have come to appreciate urban design and physical planning as tools for revitalization and the creation of humane environments. We would like to think that the complementarity of the built environment and community development informs a new approach to planning—at the very least this complementarity brings together the two focal components of our discipline: people and space.

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