



BLUEPRINT F

USF's fast growing Architecture and Community Design Program trains students to use architecture as a tool for social activism, improving communities through sustainably, affordably, and equitably built environments.

By Angie Davis

Dozens of illegal settlements have sprouted on the outskirts of Leon, Mexico, with dirt roads, no running water, and little city support. In one of these neighborhoods, known as Lomas de Guadalupe, residents are building houses on eroding land, the dirt roads wash away during the rainy season, and a three-room health clinic struggles to serve 3,000 residents. With no clean, running water or proper garbage disposal, people use the river to both bathe and wash clothes, and the area is strewn with trash.

This summer, architecture students from the University of San Francisco spent three weeks studying and working in this neighborhood. Their goal was to devise a plan for a functional community, complete with permanent housing, businesses, a



OR CHANGE

community center, as well as an expanded school and health clinic.

“Besides the fact that there is little infrastructure or public amenities in Lomas de Guadalupe, it is one of the nicest locations to build a house in all of Leon,” said junior architecture major Max Gladisch. “It lies next to wilderness and rivers and has the best views. Planned communities that we saw in Leon were cold and impersonal compared to Lomas de Guadalupe, which has grown organically. Something wonderful happens to a community when the people living there have chosen their plot of land and developed it. Through this project, I hope to understand what the residents want in a community and provide that for them rather than have them adjust their lifestyle to our way of building.”

The USF group, led by Assistant Professor Seth Wachtel, was in Leon as part of a joint project with architecture students at the Jesuit Universidad Iberoamericana Leon. At the end of the three weeks, the students presented 10-year urban development plans to a panel of faculty, community members, and city officials. The students are continuing their work on the project with a Web-based exchange of plans and designs with their Ibero Leon peers.

“The trip gave students a grounding in issues like the sociology of housing, jobs, and schools that will inform the integrated package of assistance we are putting together,” Wachtel said. The plans and designs cover everything from housing prototypes and a town square, to streetscapes, a water system, and garbage disposal. “The goal of the students is not

A Place to Call Home:

USF architecture majors have created plans for homes in the Lomas de Guadalupe neighborhood of Leon, Mexico. Above, one such design is superimposed over a photo of an existing home in that neighborhood.



to present what they think the best solution is. They interview the clients, study the culture, evaluate the problems, and then design solutions based on these observations.”

For USF architecture students, class projects are more than style over substance. Students are learning how the discipline can be used as a practical tool for sustainable and equitable community development. The 4-year-old major, which graduated its first class in May, is among the fastest growing on campus, and has carved out a niche as a program that puts architecture to work for social change.

“Architecture students will have a major influence on society and have an opportunity to make change in the world if they put their talents to work and if they can be inspired early on to make a better world

which students are assigned real projects with real clients. In addition to the design work underway for Lomas de Guadalupe, students are partnering with the nonprofit Casas Loyola, led by alumni from the Universidad Iberoamericana Leon, to help indigenous families who move to Leon looking for a better life. The USF students are designing houses for these families, incorporating cultural ways of living.

“I want our students to be sensitive to other cultures and ways houses have been designed and built over time,” Wachtel said. “We are not recreating but blending the best of what they remember with the realities of living in an urban environment.”

Students in the USF program are required to work on at least one local and one international community design outreach project. In many cases students also participate in the construction of their designs. Such

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Community Outreach:

USF students Max Gladisch (top), Dionisia Montanez (bottom left), and Erica Baptiste prepared and presented community development plans to city officials in Leon, Mexico this summer.

through better urban design, regional planning, and appropriate affordable housing,” Wachtel said.

The Architecture and Community Design Program began in 2003 with two adjunct professors and 20 students. Today there are three full-time professors, 12 adjuncts, and 85 students.

“We could have many more students, but we capped enrollment because we simply do not have the studio capacity,” Wachtel said from his office in X-Arts, a warehouse-like space of art studios and faculty offices on the ground floor of Fromm Hall that is home to the university’s booming visual arts department.

As he spoke during the first week of the fall semester, Wachtel fielded phone calls from colleagues trying to finalize class sizes and studio time and counseled students who popped in and out of his office, many hoping to add architecture as a major. “Students search out USF because word is spreading about the unique approach to architecture that the program takes. This is a pre-professional program with all of the basic requirements, but it is grounded in social justice.”

The hallmark of the program has come to be the hands-on community design outreach courses in

projects have transformed spaces around the world, from Zambia to San Francisco’s Bayview Hunter’s Point neighborhood.

Last year in Zambia, Wachtel and students helped design and build a library in the capital to help AIDS-orphaned children improve literacy and language skills. Now, students are designing a preschool for children of farmers and a health clinic in a rural Zambian village. Wachtel actively seeks funding for the projects, which are relatively inexpensive—the preschool and health clinic in Zambia, for example, could be built for about \$50,000 each.

Julie Ehrlich ’07, a member of the program’s first graduating class, said the experience of designing and building the library in Zambia was transformational.

“Architects have the power and potential to change the world and change lives in what they design and build, whether it is a home that keeps a family alive or a library that brings the community together,” said Ehrlich, who is now working at two small Bay Area architecture firms. She said she chose the smaller firms because “after having the experience of working personally with clients as a student I wanted to be able to meet my clients and not just be one of a million drafters.”

In Bay Area, Urban Development Sparks Political Conflict

By Corey Cook, assistant professor of politics



Cook

She has already designed a low-income housing development and several home remodels.


“At one firm last week my boss asked me to mark up a set of construction plans. When she reviewed my work, she asked, ‘Did you learn this in school? How do you know how to do everything I asked you?’” Ehrlich said. “A lot of schools don’t do client-based projects and construction sets—they do mostly theory. We are building for people who need it.”

Ehrlich’s experience in Zambia was so profound that she decided to join the Peace Corps. In December she will return to Africa for two years as part of the Peace Corps’ agricultural program. After her service, she plans to attend graduate school for a master’s degree in architecture.

Other graduates have landed at San Francisco’s top architecture firms, and one is in graduate school at UC Berkeley.

The program’s focus on socially responsible community building is felt closer to home as well. One project last year took students to the Bayview Hunter’s Point district where they designed a streetscape intended to clean up a crime-ridden area. They also designed and built an entrance to Adventure Playground in Berkeley and a children’s performance stage for Koshland Park in San Francisco. In Bayview, students have designed and will soon build Bridgeview Learning Garden, a place where neighbors and children will learn to grow fruit and vegetables.

The architecture major was launched in 2003 when USF discontinued its 5-year-old joint degree program with California College of the Arts. Bringing the architecture program in-house was designed to meet a growing demand and allow the university to offer a more mission-driven approach to the discipline.

“It is vital for young people at a university to experience this so they have an idea of how the world lives,” Wachtel said of the community outreach approach the program takes. “At USF students are more open to non-traditional ways of working in the world and are desiring something more than just a fast-track to money.” 

The recent controversies surrounding an upscale housing development on Rincon Hill in San Francisco and a waterfront development plan in Oakland demonstrate the centrality of land use and development issues to Bay Area politics. The reasons for this are relatively straightforward: Like other major urban areas in the United States, the Bay Area is undergoing a profound socio-economic transformation that has restructured how and where people work and live, thereby reshaping cities, neighborhoods, and the life chances of residents. This political and economic climate renders ever more crucial the role of professionals in architecture and community design.

It has become cliché to talk about the “new global economy” in any discussion of American cities. But revolutionary innovations in information and transportation technologies have dramatically increased the scale of international transactions. As a result, urban economies have evolved from the production of goods to the production of corporate services. Whether we refer to this as deindustrialization or off-shoring, the reality is that stable middle class employment in the manufacturing sector has largely disappeared. In its stead is a polarized economy organized around corporate and personal services.

As transnational corporations produce unimaginable wealth, entire sectors have emerged to service the body corporate: international finance; real estate; insurance, technical, legal, and corporate consulting firms proliferate. At the same time, gleaming high rise office complexes require janitorial services and the denizens of these spaces demand salons, stylists, baristas, even professional pet attendants. It is no mystery what kinds of jobs are being produced.

Empirical evidence suggests that wage inequality in the Bay Area and the nation, already high, is increasing. Even a cursory examination of Oakland and San Francisco reveals profound pockets of poverty juxtaposed against neighborhoods of enormous wealth. Our cities face rising homicide rates and increasing homelessness. Once nearly extinct, sweatshops mushroom in once abandoned industrial sites. And the revival of human trafficking reaches epidemic proportions.

At the same time, signs point to an urban renaissance. Where once downtowns were thought to be in a downward spiral of physical decay and social disarray, today they are reviving. High-end retail and entertainment centers cater to national and international tourists and expanding central business districts and downtown housing developments reshape the profile of urban skylines. But with this come the forces of gentrification. Small businesses must compete with global retail chains and residents struggle to keep pace with rising housing costs. Accordingly, San Francisco has experienced an outward migration of families with children and the African American population has declined precipitously.

The central political questions facing cities center on the management of these competing socio-economic forces. Our politics is marked by bitter battles over land use and urban form because seemingly mundane issues of zoning ordinances and conditional use permits conceal the deeper questions: In whose image ought a city be constructed and in whose interests ought a city be governed?

Progressive cities like Oakland and San Francisco have sought to adopt a range of public policies designed to stem displacement and enhance the viability of urban spaces. But they do so with little state and federal assistance and without a clear consensus among the citizenry.

The role of urban planners, architects, developers, and specialists in community design should not be understated. The most creative among this group are discovering and implementing new mechanisms to develop urban communities that are economically, environmentally, socially, and ethically sustainable.