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Dismantling houses

The Open Architecture Collaborative takes up tools at 2017 Leadership Summit

In February, Rice University's architecture building wore some encouraging impromptu signage: WE – WILL – NOT – BUILD – YOUR – WALL. The handful of students at work that weekend were surprised but not alarmed by the presence of some 20 international professionals in their gallery standing in circles, drawing giant lists, and listening intently – at any rate they weren't so alarmed to not hover around and diminish the leftover catering. All was well in this corner of Texas for our unique design convention.

The 2017 Open Architecture Collaborative Leadership Summit was one of those conference weekends where distant acquaintances quickly become kindred friends. We were, after all, gathered to forge a common vision for social equity built through community engaged design. Almost as powerful as the summit workshops and presentations, the meals and sangria, the AirBNB, the collective discovery of Houston, and that Turrell installation all bound us together. Then Sunday opened with an exercise that wrenched apart – we were mapping our privilege.

Facilitator Dr. Assata Richards paced throughout the empty gallery – empty except for we the kindred participants, lined against a wall. Dr. Richards is suggesting this morning that, if we aren't careful, we risk misapplying our efforts and creating harm. In fact, we may be unaware of what our work must ultimately accomplish. Dr. Richards had some questions for us.

1. Paradigm

Privilege results from unearned social standing. It has created an imbalance that is inseparable from the heritage of the United States; this nation's wealth is built on exploitation. In the gallery, we are soon to be viscerally aware of the truth of this. Dr. Richards bids us to, to the extent we're comfortable, follow a series of instructions. Her first prompt: "If you are not a U.S. resident as a result of forced migration, take two steps forward." After a general hesitation, about half the line advanced, including me but neither of my neighbors. The whole exercise lasted about 10 minutes, included moments of humiliation. Then the forward rows were asked to about face. A shock of who was where, of invisible forces making themselves plain. Suffice to say, if you are not painfully aware the effects of privilege all around you, you haven't been looking at anyone's, or most everyone's, backs.

Einstein famously said we can't solve our problems with the same thinking that created them. This sentiment with cautious optimism suggests that new means will eventually fall into our grasp to overcome whatever struggles assail us. Not convinced? Perhaps you prefer poet Audre Lorde: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Lorde sees our predicaments as oppressive, the need to escape urgent, and the means not guaranteed. Where Einstein and Lorde intersect is the awareness of the successive social paradigms: what is has not always been and will not always be. As soon as the foundations of thought shift, society restructures upon the new foundation, if ever so subtly.

Back at our seats, the participants discuss our role in catalyzing a new paradigm. Hint: it's not through one-off projects. "Your job," Dr. Richards says matter-of-factly, "is to change the social structure." A beat. "If you're trying to help." Dr. Richards has built a career empowering communities and can attest that no one is waiting for designers to come by and make things better. And certainly no one is looking for a one-night stand. If you're not committed, then walk on by.

Changing the social structure seems big. Unfathomable. But aren't architects trained in the realization of unimagined solutions? Could design be an ideal tool for dismantling a master's house, and ushering in a new paradigm? The truly difficult question presented before the Open Architecture Collaborative this day came to be: *dare we pursue this?*

2. Tools

The summit participants represented thousands throughout the world who, in their unpaid time, embrace an approach to design that not long ago shattered the concept of charity, swept it away, and replaced it with class-defying collaboration. In this effort, Architecture for Humanity laid a foundation from which the OAC must now make ready for a deeper collaborative understanding – for it is ready for us.

A new paradigm begins with transformative principles.

- Recognition: For instance, communities do not define themselves by census data, and do not label themselves "underserved." How do neighborhoods identify? You'll have to ask. Repeatedly.
- Generation: Community strength is grown from the various resources it already has. By definition, no community has or is nothing.
- Empowerment: Each partnership should eliminate the role of the designer. If the need persists, then the social structure has not been changed. The design process must be calibrated to foster community equity and community control, especially for those who have historically been prevented from improving the spaces and places they occupy.

So what does it take to support this kind of work? Saturday was spent with collaborative planner and professor Bruce Race, whose workshops defined goals, aligned resources, and showed us how to proceed. Each attendee mapped their hometown, annotating needs, local dynamics, neighborhoods where our chapters were working. We also diagrammed our professional and social networks and listed our resources (haves) and absences (needs). Bruce had us shop among each other's lists with dots – an exercise that proved difficult. We realized we were even aligned in our local challenges: broad enthusiasm but vague direction; dozens of stories but no forum. Things whose construction was only prevented by us not having recognized that which the workshops made plain.

Towards the end of the summit, beginning to process everything, we resolved a few lingering questions:

- **Does the community always know what it needs? Architects may be able to introduce new concepts.**
  Nothing should emerge not from the community. Art, for instance, is spontaneous, and available behind so many doors along the street. Interaction and facilitation are skills architects should become more comfortable with than what their training has heretofore encouraged through top-down solution making.
- **A trademark of nonprofit-style work is there being two clients: the local partner and the funder. If what's right isn't fit for glossy magazines, how do we hope to fund our work?**
  This turns out to be the biggest communications task of all: explaining the work to funders, engaging the wealthy class with stories of people, evidence of impact, and attitudes of inclusion. It so happens that architects, in their day-to-day work, speak the language of this class rather well.
- **Are we talking about an "evolution" or a "revolution"?**
  Whatever changes the social structure.

A couple weeks later I presented the summit's lessons to ten of our group at a dinner in Oakland. To me, now, it's clear how volunteers can do what needs be done. Here, a draft personal revolution:

*"Hone the process and potential of design and designers to collaborate
with neighbors and generate social equity in the built environment."*

(Also: *"Talk to strangers."*)

It's important to distinguish the ends from all the means to getting there. Even a slogan like "design like you give a damn" is only a means to addressing something larger, something we can't necessarily see, something with its back turned towards us or something that's turned our backs against others. Through all life's layers of politics, pretense, ruminations and rants, bills and rent, we end every day having done one of two things: reinforcing an unjust social structure, or overturning it.

Which world do we build?