

Re-Imagining Benefield: A Catalyst for Change

Divya Nautiyal
HKS Inc. (Citizen HKS)
Richmond, USA
dnautiyal@hksinc.com

Nick Cooper
HKS Inc. (Citizen HKS)
Richmond, USA
ncooper@hksinc.com

Philip Miller
HKS Inc. (Citizen HKS)
Richmond, USA
pmiller@hksinc.com

ABSTRACT

Our goal is to share our experiences of working on an architectural project with community members in Highland Park, Richmond, Virginia (U.S.), which is a predominantly black neighborhood that has been historically overlooked by the political system. The rationale for the process was that the partnership and engagement with the participants would lead to architectural solutions that provide participants control not just in the development but in the long-term use and appropriation as the community's vision changes over time. The theme of representation, resistance, and governance relates the most to our project. Instead of relying on "universal" cookie-cutter solutions in community-based architectural design processes, we have been exploring participatory design methods as a way of broadening participation and building community capacity. We want to share our participatory design approach and open it to critique and feedback from other Participatory Design practitioners present during the session.

Author Keywords

Architecture; community design; community participation; participatory design; social engagement; community-based architecture; black legacy; equity; gentrification.

INTRODUCTION

Highland Park is a neighborhood that has historically been overlooked by the political system. Consequently, the economic prospects for the majority of the residents in the area have been bleak. Considering this, the community members have been marginalized from their participation in local institutional decision making and have had a complex relationship with ins-

titutions. True equity is about inclusivity across the board, including in decision making. At a higher level, this project is about enabling democratic participation such that everyone can participate in decisions that can influence their future, and thereby, slowly fight against existing systemic oppression. Our project aims to be an example of a responsible, equity-based approach that engages and empowers marginalized groups to have a say in the designs and decisions that affect their lives.

About the benefield building

The Benefield building is a 10, 000 sq. ft. vacant building in Highland Park built in the 1920s and is one of the many abandoned buildings along the Highland Park innovation corridor. The Benefield building is struggling to find its place in a neighborhood that is currently in the initial stages of gentrification. A small portion of the abandoned building is presently occupied by Six Point Innovation Center (6PIC), a non-profit organization committed to training the youth of Highland Park in community advocacy, art (music, dance, fine arts), green construction, healing, etc. The values with which 6PIC were founded on include creativity, justice, trust, collaboration, agency, authenticity, and sustainability. These deeply rooted organizations have been operating in Highland Park for quite some time now, so aligning with their mission and momentum is imperative. Alongside this alignment, we aim to identify a program and reuse this aging infrastructure to create a resource that honors the character and the fabric of the Highland Park. As co-creators, we want to bring about awareness about the other vacant buildings in the area to help re-invigorate the community and, in turn, the neighborhood. Our goal through this project is to help create social enterprises, which help in maximizing the social, financial, and environmental well-being of the residents of Highland Park.

Process

The overall design intent was to create a place that instills a sense of pride in its residents by creating awa-

reness about its rich black history. We hope to develop Highland Park as the nucleus of black innovation and excellence. One of the most critical aspects of this project is the identification of an appropriate program for the building. In doing so, the program must reflect the values of the Highland Park community. To help develop the program, we devised various community engagement methods - short surveys, SWOT analysis, and vision development through larger group sessions. Our objective is to create and validate a design process that allows for a complete democratic participation. Through rigorous sessions with our design partners as well as the community, we arrived on the decision to create a unique live/work model that provides access to innovative resources for the talented youth. Given the vast generation gap in the community demographic, the community aims to create a deserving future for themselves and a place where the youth can reconnect with the older generation.

The architecture

The architecture of a place should be a true reflection of its people. At different junctures through the design process, we asked ourselves – *why, what, how, and so what?* Through an iterative design process, we wanted to get closer to an appropriate solution that aligned with the vision of the community and the needs of the residents. Intermittently, along the design process, different design components were vetted by the community. We intend to have more engagement sessions with the community to make critical design decisions like color selection, murals, types of outdoor spaces, program appropriation, etc. as we move forward with the project.



Figure 1. View of the proposed Benefield building

We went through a series of design sessions to arrive at the first iteration of programs. These include a community flex space, white box testing space, an outdoor classroom, jewel space, and a small component of

community housing on the upper floors. The first and the most elemental is the community flex space, where small community events can take place and occasionally be leased out to private or government organizations that carefully align with the vision for the community. The second is the white box testing space provided for the youth to explore and experiment with start-up business ideas. There is also an outdoor classroom for kids, where after-school programs can take place. As shown in Figure 1, the thread that connects these spaces is a historic Spanish art deco façade, which in combination with the jewel space will celebrate the rich black history at Highland Park. Last but not least is the housing component on the first and the second floor. We intend that with the inclusion of programs mentioned above, Highland Park will be the next iteration of justice built on a foundation of true equity.

Learnings and challenges

A few learning opportunities and challenges we have encountered in our project are:

Enabling design for all

How do you know that the diverse groups of participants have been included in the design process and that their voices have been heard? In a historically marginalized population like ours, lack of agency and distrust in institutional processes among the participants further adds to the complexity in realizing genuinely democratic participation. In the session, we will reflect on different ways we have tried to ensure more democratic participation in our process. While through community outreach programs, we have attempted to broaden participation, the extent of complete representation across the board remains unclear.

Supporting Negotiation and Goal Setting

The enduring concern in design is “*How do you know what the right thing is to do?*” and “*How do you know that you have done it?*” In our case, the challenges of establishing metrics for success are multifaceted: the values that the residents hold do not necessarily align with other stakeholders including partner organizations, the residents may not feel – and indeed, may not have – enough agency to endure negotiations that are necessary for a large design project like this, and there are multiple challenges in retaining the residents’ interests in the project. Establishing metrics for success that the participants can easily comprehend can be beneficial in a project like ours. We will present

our ongoing effort in this direction and open up discussions to possible alternatives to the approach.

CONCLUSION

Social inequity is a hurdle that limits our access to equitable and safe places. Through this process, our goal has been to help create a responsible, equity-based value proposition that can help create a place for all. This project stands for its residents to have the right to equitable access to good education, a nurturing living community, employment, healthy food, a safe place to sleep. True equity is about inclusivity across the board. It is about opportunities being made available to everyone so they can develop tools to create a future for themselves by deconstructing systemic oppression. The range of speakers at PDC 2020 will invite a broad range of participants from around the world. This will be a great opportunity to get visibility for our project as well as learn more about the work of other PD practitioners. We want to take home new learnings and feedback that can help elevate the process as we move to the next design stage. We want to share our participatory design approach and open it to critique and feedback from other PD practitioners present during the session.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Our design partners include Boaz & Ruth Inc. and Storefront for Community Design. This project would not have been accomplished without Megan Rollins and Ryan Rinn. We would like to thank Citizen HKS for providing us with a platform and enabling this project. We would also like to thank Aakash Gautam for introducing us to the Participatory Design Conference and motivating us to participate.