Working With Experience

David Perkes
Gulf Coast Community Design Studio and Mississippi State University

Christine Gaspar
Gulf Coast Community Design Studio

Abstract

This article addresses the work of Mississippi State University's Gulf Coast Community Design Studio to help families in Biloxi, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina damaged homes in the city. The article argues that specialized knowledge of planning, design, or construction is less important than the ability to engage and understand the cultural background and interests of a community. Such experience*, as opposed to* expertise*, facilitates effective communication and cooperation among all stakeholders and helps to best improve the community's ability to recover and rebuild.*

Introduction

The life of community design is not expertise; it is experience. This statement does not mean that expertise is not an important part of community design; it means that expertise is not the motivation that shapes and sustains a community design practice. Although both expertise and experience can be used to describe acquired skills, considering the difference between the two words is instructive.

Expertise describes uncommon skills or specialized abilities that set one person or a group of people apart from others. *Experience*, on the other hand, describes a quality of skill and knowledge that comes from commonly shared events or phenomena and that forms and strengthens human relationships around those phenomena. In its inclusive sense, experience is everything that comes from the interaction of the human organism with its environment: beliefs, customs, values, politics, and prejudices; in short, another name for culture.[1]

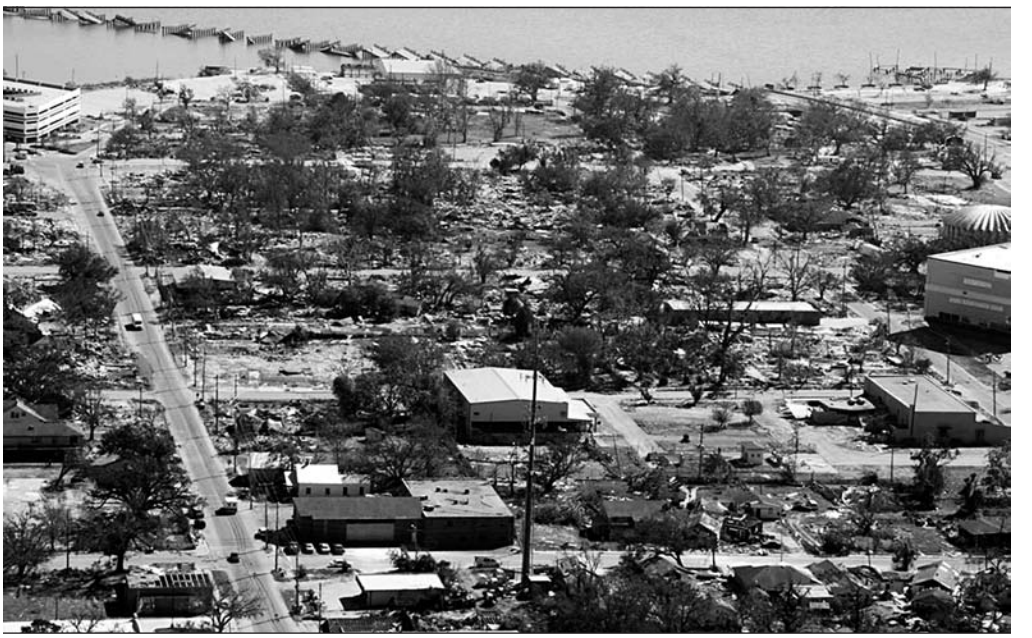
[1] The sense of the word "experience" used here follows John Dewey's writing in his book *Experience and Nature*. (See Dewey, 1958.) John Dewey later stated that he wished he had called the book *Nature and Culture*. (See Menand, 2001.) Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., also uses the word "experience" in a similar sense in his influential work *The Common Law*, in which he states that "experience is the life of law." (See Holmes, 1995.) Holmes's notion of experience, like Dewey's, includes beliefs, customs, and values and is behind his important teaching that precedence shapes the law more than principle.

When experience defines an idea as broad as culture, it is seen as being more shared than individual, more common than unique. Experience is the life force of a community in the way that values, beliefs, and customs form the community's identity within the living environment. Therefore, it follows that human experience—and not individual expertise—is the means, the context for judgment, the sustaining force, and the reward of community design work. The degree to which a design practice works with experience, not the measure of expertise, is the primary condition that distinguishes community design from a commercial architectural practice.

Expertise can certainly be brought into a community; however, in the urgency and displacement resulting from Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 (see exhibit 1), experience—not expertise—proved to be the essential ingredient for effective community design in Biloxi, Mississippi. David Perkes, of Mississippi State University's College of Architecture, Art, and Design, arrived in post-Hurricane Katrina Biloxi directly from Jackson, Mississippi, after 14 years of teaching college students the art of community-based design practice. The experience that David brought allowed us—the authors and the design team, as it grew—to immediately focus on relationship-building with local residents and community leaders, rather than on the nuts-and-bolts operational piece of starting a new community design practice. By transferring the experiences of the Jackson model to Biloxi, we connected quickly with local officials and faith-based organizations to implement the Mississippi State University's Gulf Coast Community Design Studio that has, since the fall of 2005, helped more than 200 displaced, low-income families restore or rebuild their Gulf Coast homes.

Exhibit 1

East Biloxi, Mississippi



An aerial view of East Biloxi 1 month after Hurricane Katrina destroyed many buildings in the city.

The Context

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast and led architects and planners from around the country to offer their expertise to assist in the face of unprecedented destruction. Several groups of professionals rallied to the relief efforts, but the most publicized was the Mississippi Renewal Forum, more commonly referred to as the "Governor's Charrette." This ambitious planning effort, which was organized and dominated by the Congress for the New Urbanism, attracted more than 100 architects, planners, engineers, and other professionals from outside the state and an equal number of professionals from Mississippi. The charrette took place in the middle of October, 6 weeks after the storm.

The workspace for the charrette was located in one of the shuttered casino hotels already busy with contractors working to get the casino back on line. Outside the improvised workspace, the damage on the coast was stunning, and the destroyed areas were still under military guard. The contrast between lovingly rendered drawings being pinned up inside the hotel and the massive, four-story casino barge smashed into the side of the hotel's parking garage was nearly impossible to reconcile.

It is safe to say that there has never been such a gathering of planning professionals brought in and put to work in such a place in such short order. Although the sense of urgency and the scale of the planning and rebuilding effort warranted that such an army of professionals be rallied into action, the event quickly came and went. Afterwards, the Gulf Coast communities were left with the overwhelming work at hand. The charrette process, which by design brings a team of professionals into a community for a short, concentrated design activity, relies on expertise. A community design practice, on the other hand, takes time.

Getting Started

Four early decisions guided the formation of what became the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio (GCCDS):

1. Create a workspace within the community to be served.
2. Form long-term partnerships with local organizations.
3. Avoid political and ideological alliances.
4. Most importantly, be useful to the community.

After the roads were clear and gasoline was available for travel, David Perkes used the first few weeks to seek out community organizations on the coast that needed help and could be potential partners. Our goal was for the College of Architecture, Art, & Design to become a component of the larger rebuilding effort. Rebuilding organizations were looking for the expertise that the College of Architecture could bring, and we were looking for the conditions of experience that would make us useful to the community.

Perkes met with representatives from many local and national faith-based and other volunteer organizations to identify design needs and available resources. He connected with Bill Stallworth,

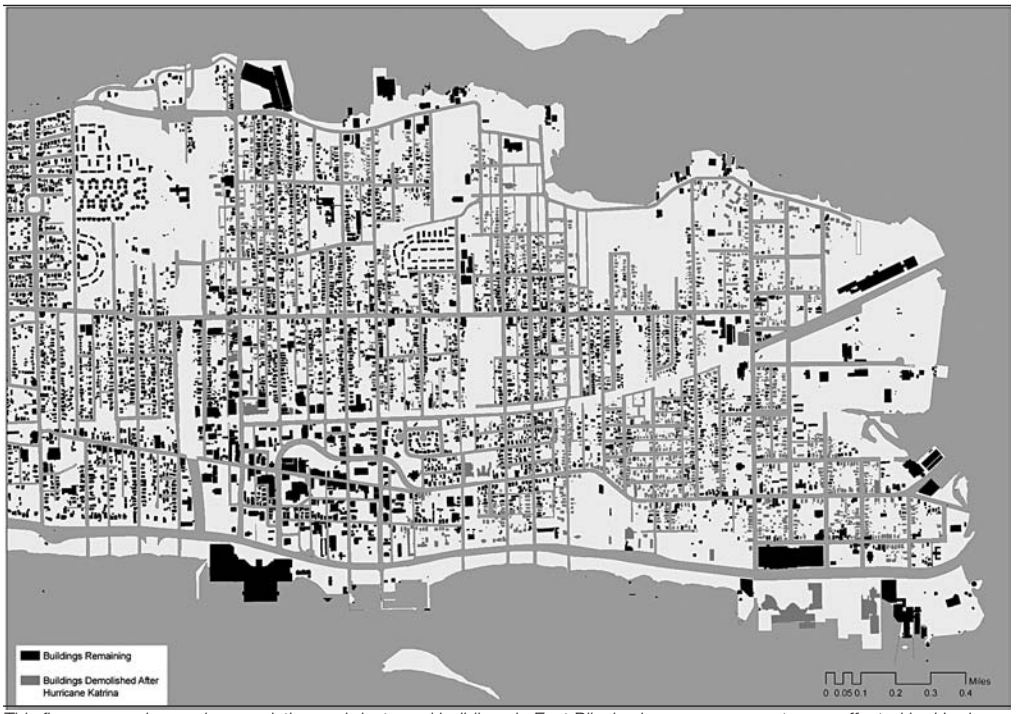
a member of the Biloxi City Council, who, immediately after the hurricane, had led efforts in East Biloxi to create a centralized place for volunteer groups to get information and coordinate their efforts. This newly formed organization became known as the East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center, or simply "the coordination center." The GCCDS was one of a few key groups that would become permanent community partners in this coordination center—a strategy that would prove crucial to the rebuilding efforts.

East Biloxi Coordination and Relief Center

East Biloxi is an area 4 miles long and 1 mile across at the tip of the Biloxi peninsula. Most of the peninsula, which is less then 12 feet above sea level, borders on the Gulf of Mexico to the south and the Back Bay to the north. Hurricane Katrina's unprecedented storm surge, which was well over 20 feet in Biloxi, inundated the entire peninsula, affecting every house. When the water subsided, nearly half of the existing 4,000 houses had been completely destroyed and the other half had been flooded. With more than 10,000 residents, East Biloxi comprises around one-fifth of Biloxi's population, but, because of its topography, it represents most of the neighborhoods that were severely damaged by the hurricane. (See exhibit 2.)

Exhibit 2

Post-Hurricane Katrina Damage in East Biloxi, Mississippi



This figure ground map shows existing and destroyed buildings in East Biloxi, where every property was affected by Hurricane Katrina and almost all properties were inundated by the storm surge.

The GCCDS's first programmatic assistance to the community coordination center was the creation of the "grid map," which, by dividing East Biloxi into 24 numbered blocks, facilitated communication and coordination for the relief and cleanup efforts. The coordination center and dozens of organizations used stacks of the color grid maps, reproduced on 11- by 17-inch paper, to plan and distribute relief and rebuilding activities. The relatively easy task of making a well-designed map had a magnified impact. The primary function was to coordinate relief activities, but the grid map also resulted in two byproducts. First, the community looked at the map and was able to imagine an organized relief effort at a time when everyone felt overwhelmed and confused. This representation of organization focused the community's attention on the coordination center as the place where much-needed help could be found. The map's second byproduct was the way it introduced the community and the many relief organizations to the architects and planners of the GCCDS. Many people in the community were already suspicious of outside planners because of the highly publicized Mississippi Renewal Forum. Despite the charrette's support from the state's elected leaders and its positive publicity, many residents were upset that they had been left out of the planning process and were offended that a planning firm from California was showing them "what East Biloxi could look like." The fact that the GCCDS simply made clear and useful maps was an important way to gain the community's trust.

In the fall of 2005, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development announced the Universities Rebuilding America Partnership (URAP) grant. To be eligible for the grant, the GCCDS needed to quickly identify a community partner. The formalization of the relationship between the GCCDS and the coordination center would become a critical step in the development of both organizations. For the GCCDS, in particular, it would define the role of the studio as one that is embedded within a community-based agency and in which design is one aspect of a larger reconstruction effort. The grant money from URAP became available in early 2006.

Working Method

The GCCDS's first objective was to organize a group of qualified architects and planners who could provide design and planning assistance for those people with the greatest need. This was not the time for teaching, even though opportunities to involve students would certainly follow. This was the time for professional action. Damaged houses needed to be assessed, volunteers needed help knowing how to repair houses, new houses with new requirements needed to be designed and built, hundreds of residents needed help making decisions about their community, and concerned people from all over the country who wanted to help needed to be organized and armed with necessary information and tools.

Maps turned out to be one of the most useful tools. Using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to make effective maps exemplifies the overlap of expertise and experience. The grid map is one of many maps that the studio created for use in the community. The GCCDS's title block on these maps, which quickly became a familiar graphic reminder that a group of architects was working in the community, helped to bring a sense of order and encouragement to the residents, who were in the midst of confusion and disorder. Other maps the GCCDS created included flood maps to clearly explain the otherwise confusing Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) advisory

flood levels, maps showing the disproportionate impact of the hurricane damage on Biloxi's Vietnamese community, and maps showing the change of policy for casinos newly allowed to be built within 800 feet of the coast line. The community soon recognized that the GCCDS had the expertise to produce such maps. As previously stated, however, expertise generally can be demonstrated and understood in value-neutral terms. Experience, on the other hand, is directly shaped by a community's values. The GIS mapping expertise, our access to information, and the tools and technical skills to produce these maps were effective only because the community had come to trust the GCCDS. Groups such as the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA), Coastal Women for Change, Mississippi Center for Justice, and Oxfam in America sought early meetings with the GCCDS director to determine our values and to see whom we represented. Once these advocacy organizations realized that we were willing and able to produce maps that depicted their community concerns, the GCCDS became a trusted community partner.

From the outset, Architecture for Humanity (AFH) was also a key East Biloxi partner. AFH is a "charitable organization that seeks architectural solutions to humanitarian crisis and brings design services to communities in need" (see www.architectureforhumanity.org/about). Identifying the GCCDS as a worthwhile partner in the rebuilding efforts, AFH sponsored a model home program and provided the GCCDS $25,000 to help hire an intern. This funding began the design studio's staff expansion and widened its reach into the community.

AFH began seeking funds for the coordination center and provided initial funds for the GCCDS to hire its first intern before the URAP funds were awarded. AFH succeeded in getting a rebuilding grant from Oprah's Angel Network for the coordination center. The funding, which covered some of the center's operating costs, was used to create grants for construction—$20,000 each for 75 houses. Additional funding was used to construct a group of model houses. Oprah's Angel Network has been East Biloxi's largest and most continuous source of funds for construction.

AFH also contributed by bringing Warnke Community Consultants to work with the coordination center. In the early spring of 2006, Warnke Community Consultants, along with the GCCDS and the coordination center, created and administered a resident survey. More than 600 residents completed the surveys. In addition, Warnke and the others led a series of community meetings to produce the *East Biloxi Community Action Plan.*[2] At around the same time, with the help of many volunteer architecture students during spring break, the GCCDS organized a complete property inventory of East Biloxi, which included more than 4,000 lots.

The results of the resident survey offer some insight into the community's experience of East Biloxi. When asked what people liked most about living in East Biloxi before Hurricane Katrina, the top response was "sense of community." The closely ranked second response was "friends and family." Residents selected these two choices on the survey twice as often as the other choices, such as "affordable housing," "schools," and "good place to raise children." Likewise, when asked to choose three things they most wanted to see rebuilt, restored, or improved in East Biloxi, the

[2] See Warnke Community Consulting (2006).

greatest proportion of respondents chose "affordable housing," followed by "sense of community." With hundreds of families displaced and living in FEMA trailers, placing affordable housing as the top priority is expected. Knowing that the respondents placed sense of community second, however, rating it above choices such as employment opportunities, low crime rate, schools, and social services, echoes the reasons people gave for why they liked to live in East Biloxi. The choice clearly indicates that the residents value social experience and that they identify East Biloxi as a place that has whatever it is that people imagine when they use the phrase "sense of community." For the GCCDS, the realization that we are working in such a place and that we are engaged in an effort to restore not only houses but the intangible set of values included in "sense of community" shapes the way we work.

The GCCDS used the property data from the completed inventory to create new, detailed maps. (See exhibits 3a and 3b.) The property database has been updated three times with the help of volunteers: in November 2006, June 2007, and June 2008. The GCCDS has used the data to produce maps describing property conditions, locations of trailers, and rebuilding status, as well as changes in these conditions over time. Many organizations have used the maps to describe the community's needs and rebuilding progress. Having detailed, current information and the ability to make well-designed maps have made the GCCDS useful to the community and led to the creation of many partnerships.

Exhibit 3a

Residential Property Status Map, 2006

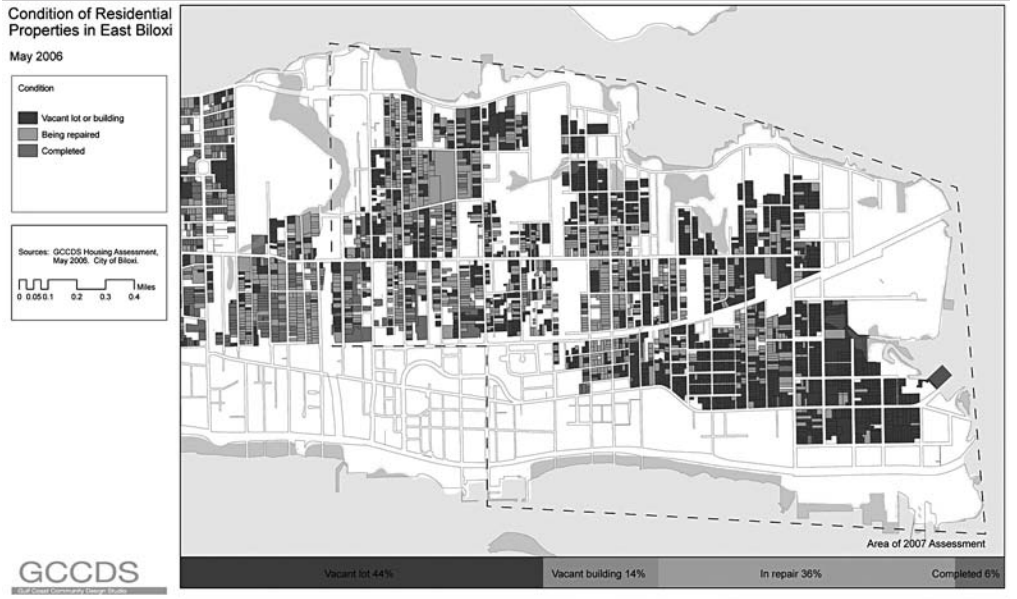


Exhibit 3b

Residential Property Status Map, 2007

Working Space

Just as experience is described here as the interactions among community, context, and actions, the work in East Biloxi can be understood through the lens of working environment, which initially was shaped by the emerging relationships among organizations and which now influences how those relationships continue to evolve.

The unusually high degree of cooperation among organizations in East Biloxi is evident in the day-to-day work and the working space. Out of necessity, the GCCDS and the coordination center initially shared workspace in the second-floor offices of a local church. Such pragmatic decisions were almost automatic in the unusual context immediately after the storm. Procedures and policies that would hinder the work were easy to spot and were to be avoided.

Although the GCCDS and coordination center appreciated this temporary workspace, it was too small and was divided into separate rooms. Both organizations soon needed more space, but their leaders believed that continuing to work in the same space would be most productive. Consequently, the two organizations began looking for a permanent building in which they could continue to share working space while having more space in which to work. In the new space, the two organizations were joined by NAVASA and two of the nonprofit organizations responsible for leading volunteer construction work.

At the same time the organizations were seeking new space, many volunteer organizations were working on hundreds of houses, cleaning out some, gutting others, and treating some for mold. The GCCDS, with the help of many volunteer architecture students, began to assess, measure,

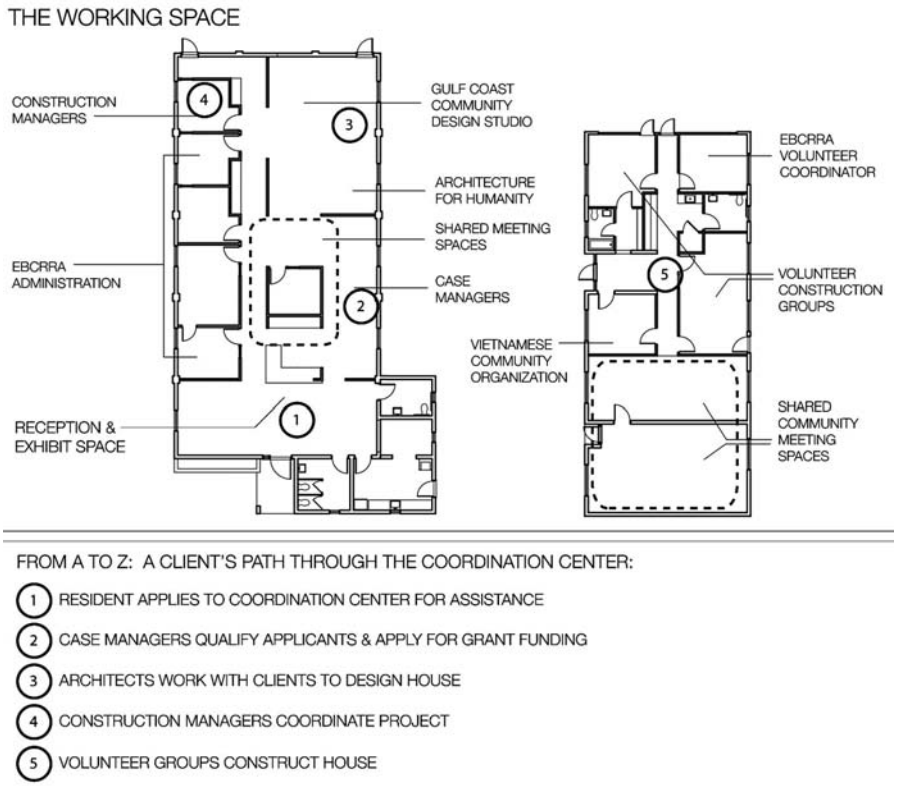
and replan existing houses. Then we began designing new houses. Soon people in the community began to see the GCCDS staff and the many volunteers as part of the coordination center. Although the GCCDS is part of Mississippi State University's College of Architecture, Art, and Design, it has not been important to the rebuilding work in East Biloxi to emphasize the university affiliation. In fact, it is likely that a community can tell when the overriding purpose of a community design center is to promote the university. Promotional activities are especially counterproductive in low-income, minority communities such as East Biloxi, in which residents are already suspicious of academics and outside experts.

In the spring of 2007, the coordination center and several of its partners, moved into a workspace that the GCCDS designed in collaboration with the coordination center and that studio staff, students, volunteers, and paid subcontractors built. This location also houses several of the volunteer construction organizations, as well as AFH and NAVASA.

The new location comprises two buildings, which were formerly used as a church and rectory. The plan of the new, renovated building shows the continuous flow of the design studio with the case management, construction management, and administration of the coordination center. The workspace is a direct and pragmatic architectural response that shapes the way work is done and the way the community imagines the work is done. (See exhibit 4.) Every day continuous movement

Exhibit 4

Plan Diagram of the Coordination Center



crosses open boundaries between different parts of the center. The materials, colors, and dimensions differentiate the different programs—intake and waiting, case management, administration, design studio, meeting—yet the entire space shares the strong volume of the building with its regular bays, repetitive windows, and exposed wood roof structure.

The boundaries between program spaces are intensified by large sliding doors that simultaneously separate and connect the spaces as they are used. The doors were constructed as large chalkboards, which offer surfaces for interaction. The sliding chalkboard door that forms the boundary between the design studio and the coordination center's construction managers' offices is especially significant because it is covered with the list of current house-building projects. More than 100 projects, listed by homeowner name and address, are updated continuously. The case managers and construction managers come into the design studio space to update and read the boards. In addition, dozens of visitors, elected officials (including the governor), potential funders, partners, and representatives of other rebuilding organizations have toured the coordination center, seen the case managers at work, met the construction managers, and ended up in the design studio in front of the two 4- by 8-foot chalkboard lists of projects. It is here, standing in the studio space amidst 12 architects and interns working at computers surrounded by drawings of houses, maps, and planning studies (see exhibits 5 and 6) that visitors typically provide a positive expression indicating that they are seeing something unique, the extraordinary effectiveness of a well-coordinated effort. The working space and the working method merge in the community's experience, inviting visitors to become part of what they see.

The shared workspace changes the day-to-day communication among clients, case managers, builders, and designers. In a typical architectural firm, project communication is formalized into presentations, job meetings, phone calls, e-mails, and transmittals. Although such communication methods are good for documenting and protecting the liability of the architect, they add time to the project and divide the various partners. A community design practice has the opportunity to reduce such administrative procedures because the design center is not using money to leverage control over how projects are carried out. Collaboration with volunteers and charitable funders means that the control is not centralized within the design studio only and that designers' personal relationships with construction managers, case managers, funding organizations, and volunteer-builder groups determine the outcomes of a given project. These relationships are created because the conditions of collaboration are based on shared goals of helping the larger community and not meeting the terms of legal and contractual arrangements. Professional expertise still requires accuracy and completeness, and the community design studio work should be held to the same standard of care as a commercial architectural practice; however, because the homeowner is not paying for architectural services and typically the construction is done by a volunteer organization that does not have a contractual relationship to the owner and architect, the design and building process is more dependent on cooperation than on contract. Therefore, more ongoing communication is necessary to keep the project on track.

Working with volunteer builders can present its own unique challenges. We have found that, at times, generous, out-of-town volunteer builders with previous building experience in mind take

up a part of a project through their own lens of construction and with the single goal of getting a family into a house. Their best intentions can be at odds with the structural strength, material durability, and design intentions of the project. This challenge brings heightened importance to the need for the community design practice to maintain effective relationships with all parties so that the houses we build serve the homeowner for many years and bring value to the community. The day-to-day collaboration of the stakeholders of the coordination center helps to facilitate these relationships and further roots the design studio in the community and in the community's values.

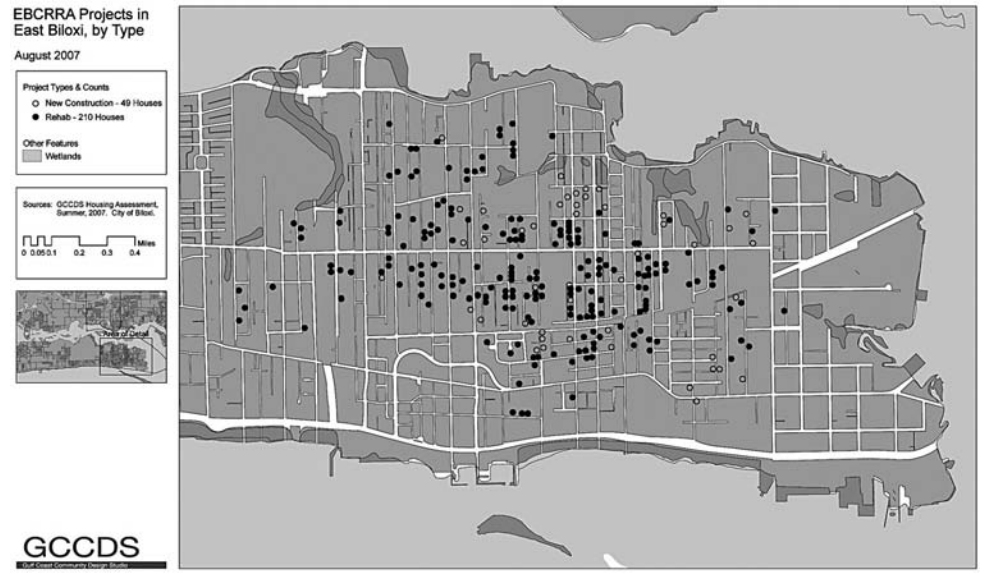
Exhibit 5

Working Space in the Coordination Center

Top: The entire workspace. Left: The project tracking board is used by all the organizations in the buildings. Bottom center: Bill Stallworth explains the coordination center's work to Governor Haley Barbour. Bottom right: Students pin their work on a studio wall. Center right: A case manager meets with a client. Center: Sliding doors in the design studio.

Exhibit 6

Map of Coordination Center Projects



Work Flow and Responsibilities

Three years after Hurricane Katrina struck, the GCCDS and the coordination center have a well-developed process. At any given time, approximately 30 active new house-building projects and 60 rehabilitation projects are under way. (See exhibit 7.) To date, the design studio has completed plans for more than 200 houses—150 rehabs and 50 new construction. A strength of the coordination center's work as compared with other Gulf Coast recovery programs, is its commitment to the resident.

Once a resident is on the list for a new house or an existing house renovation, he or she remains on the list until the project is complete. The money for construction is composed of a combination of the owner's funds and several grants. The average total cost for a new house is approximately $65,000, with volunteer labor for all of the construction other than plumbing, electrical, and mechanical. The coordination center assumes responsibility for selecting and qualifying the homeowner and managing the individual grant work. Once a client is ready for a house plan, he or she is added to the project list and the GCCDS begins meeting with the client to start the design process. On completion of the design, the GCCDS helps the homeowner obtain a building permit.

The coordination center's construction managers, with the help of the GCCDS, manage various building groups comprising paid subcontractors, volunteer organizations, sometimes the GCCDS staff, and, in some cases, architecture students, all of whom help with the construction. The division of work is important to the process. If the GCCDS attempted to do the homeowner selection, grant management, and construction management work, we would be able to complete only a few houses and our professional expertise would not be fully used. The division of responsibility—case

Exhibit 7

Several GCCDS Homes in East Biloxi, Mississippi

management, design, construction management—in combination with daily collaboration, is key to the output of the coordination center. Because of the effectiveness of this approach to date, others are looking at this rebuilding method as a model for their communities.

Lessons

Several general lessons have emerged from the GCCDS's work within the community. These lessons are illustrated as the work is compared to other university-affiliated design-build programs. Most design-build programs emphasize the use of students and focus on a single building project. In this way, the building is conceived as exceptional in its design and in its building process. In other words, everyone involved sees it as being outside of normal practice. This exceptional distinction creates opportunities to experiment and is therefore beneficial to research and teaching goals. The GCCDS has some of the same ingredients as other design-build programs; however, the emphasis is shifted and the number of variables is multiplied. Typically, the GCCDS has approximately 30 new homebuilding projects at one time that are in either the design or the construction phase. All 12 GCCDS full-time interns and architects have several ongoing house projects. They

design each house with extensive interaction with a family, consultation with the case managers and construction managers of the coordination center, and day-to-day conversations within the studio. Many people are doing the construction: subcontractors, skilled volunteers, and, at times, GCCDS designers and students. The many projects and multiple participants create a complex system of feedback, so the design process is not focused on one exceptional house. Instead it is spread out as a practice.

The multiplied number of families, designers, case managers, funders, builders, church groups, code inspectors, and neighbors is the context of the GCCDS community design practice. The emphasis is not on an exceptional house or on a group of fortunate architecture students. Experience, in its inclusive sense, does not have a narrow emphasis. There are special times of focus that demonstrate strong contrast to the daily background of this broader practice. At a house dedication, for example, the new homeowner, a group of faith-based volunteers in matching T-shirts, architects, interns, students, and case managers might be standing in the newly finished house. One of the volunteers, who now changes roles from a builder to a minister, asks that everyone hold hands as he offers a prayer. Tears are shed. The homeowner feels the outpouring of compassion. The house becomes a sacred place and the professional roles drop away long enough to share the experience. And then we go back to work.

Authors

David Perkes is director of the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio and an architect and associate professor at the Mississippi State University College of Architecture, Art, and Design.

Christine Gaspar is an intern architect and community planner with the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio.

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