

## **Re-viewing the Builder's Yard as a Place for Design Visualization**

Charlie Hailey, Ph.D., School of Architecture, University of Florida

Presented at the Association of Community Design Annual Conference, New York, March 31, 2005

### ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the "Builder's Yard" as an urban site for visualizing and making community design decisions. The primary objective is to understand how the Builder's Yard might function in urban communities, particularly inner-city areas, as a place for working out community design alternatives and as a new type of community center for educational and experimental construction activity.

The research begins by evaluating Christopher Alexander's version of the Builder's Yard from his work *The Production of Houses*. This paper critically explores and expands on the work of Alexander and other practitioners in order to understand how community design and construction activity might be integrated in a centrally located, highly urbanized site (in contrast to the exurban condition of Alexander's project) – allowing for a more diverse group of participants and resulting in a greater degree of design visualization.

One premise for this project is that the design visualization facilitated in the Builder's Yard is not limited to traditional modes of representation (such as drawings) but incorporates more empirical mock-ups, constructed details, workshop production, and process-oriented demonstration and education. It is believed that this "hands-on" quality will allow for the involvement of a wider range of participants – all ages and skill levels. The paper takes Gainesville, Florida as a case study and looks at how a Builder's Yard might be funded, sited, and fully utilized. This particular case of the Builder's Yard will also have the potential to serve the Pleasant Street Neighborhood, a traditionally African-American historic district in Gainesville. Discussion will focus on the formulation of a Builder's Yard that emphasizes modes of visualization and facilitates inclusion of community members, specific to Gainesville but also applicable to other urban situations.

Overall, it is expected that the Builder's Yard will serve as a site for a democratic design process -- incorporating education, experimentation, and fabrication. In sum, this research seeks to develop a Builder's Yard model that will serve as a community center and workshop for visualizing and developing community design programs within an inner city environment.

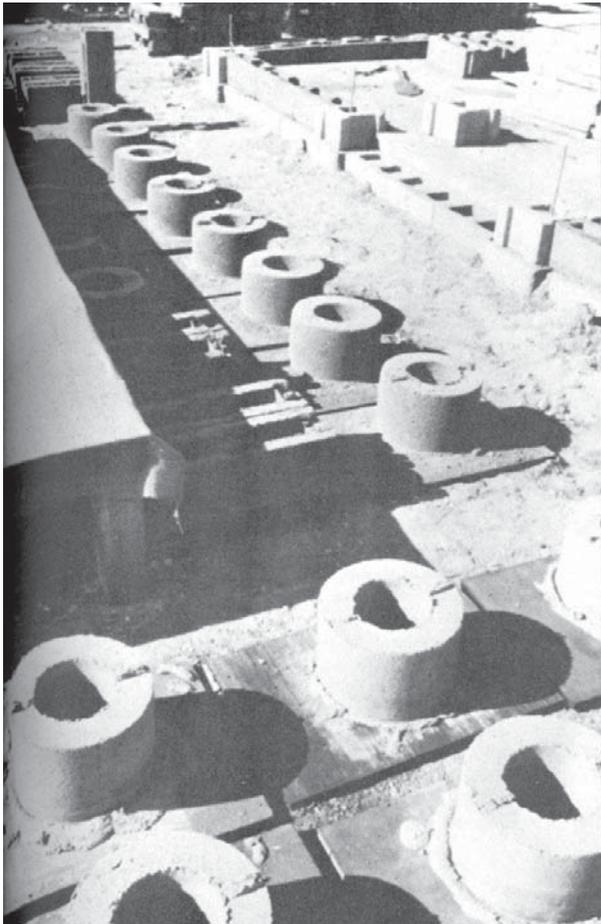
### DESCRIPTION OF CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER'S BUILDER'S YARD IN MEXICALI

In 1975, the Mexican government contracted with Christopher Alexander to build housing for 30 families near Mexicali. The rapidly increasing population along the border necessitated experimentation with alternative solutions for earthquake-resistant houses suited to the desert climate. Derived from previous projects, two inter-related premises framed Alexander's Mexicali work: the system of housing production characterizes a society's houses and improving design without changing the production system will not solve the housing problem. The overall goal of the project was to remove the systematized disconnect between end-users and architectural production, which includes design, the manufacture of building materials, and housing construction.

From the outset, Alexander conceived of the *colonia* development as a self-help demonstration project in which the families would participate in the design and construction of

their own homes. In the design phases, Alexander's inchoate "pattern language" served as the mediator between architect-builder and home-owners in Mexicali.<sup>1</sup> Introduced as a previously unexplored model, the Builder's Yard served as the site for educational and self-help construction activity. Alexander believed that the combination of these methods along with the participation of each family in the process would yield unique and differentiated housing units.

Alexander and his co-workers in Mexicali saw the Builder's Yard as the operational and communal focal point of the project (Figures 1 and 2). Writing retrospectively about the project, Dorit Fromm and Peter Bosselmann, members of Alexander's team, described the Yard as "the seed of an oasis against the surrounding dust and glare."<sup>2</sup> As the project's germinal site, the Yard's many functions included the identification of locally available materials, the study of building systems, and the experimentation with techniques. In its form, the actual yard was a courtyard space with a central fountain. This open courtyard was defined by an arcaded entrance, an open loggia, a tool shed, and a more enclosed courtyard complex. Proposed plans for this latter space included builders' lodging, communal dining facilities, offices, and an interior garden. Though short-lived, a taco stand near the main entrance activated the yard's spaces during the construction process.



*Figure 1.* Column blocks laid out in Builder's Yard, Mexicali, Mexico, 1976 (Christopher Alexander, *The Production of Houses*)

Before construction began on the houses, the Builder's Yard served as the site for testing interlocking soil cement blocks and ultra-lightweight concrete vaults built over lightweight woven baskets. The refined details and material studies were then used to construct the Yard's interior workshops and courtyard spaces. During the construction of the houses, the Builder's Yard became the locus of construction preparation and continued experimentation -- working out building details, fabricating window assemblies, and testing the alternative materials. With its prominent corner lot, the Yard was also an important element in the planning of the future growth of clusters. To facilitate education and interaction, architecture students from American and regional Universities along with design and construction professionals staffed the Yard during construction of the family housing units.

For Alexander at the time of the Mexicali project, the Builder's Yard represented a "new social institution" in which communities would be given direct control of

the standards and process of construction. The Mexican government allowed design and construction standards to be defined by Alexander and by the resulting self-help process. Believing that the actual formulation of Mexicali's and future yards depended on the

particular context and the specific community's needs and desires, Alexander described the yard's overall spatial conception:

For in order to make this social decentralization of control work, the control must be decentralized geographically, spatially, within the community or town or region where houses are being made...we propose a system of builder's yards, each one with an organic relation to the neighborhood which it serves...each one with an ongoing responsibility to function as a nucleus of construction activity...a physical anchor point: a source of information, tools, equipment, materials, and guidance. (93-5)



Figure 2. Mixing cement in the Builder's Yard  
(Alexander, *The Production of Houses*)

The Builder's Yard succeeded in its initial purpose to provide a site, or "nucleus," of construction activity, which was short-lived because of the Mexican government's non-renewal of the contract after the first cluster of 5 family homes was completed. However, the Mexicali Yard failed in its longer-term purpose as a community center, as a place for continued education about building construction and maintenance, and as a formal anchor for the *colonia*.

#### CRITICAL REVIEW OF ALEXANDER'S BUILDER' YARD Review of Problems Associated with the Builder's Yard

The Builder' Yard initially served as an important locus of construction and community activity. However, the frequency of its use declined with the completion of the first cluster of homes. The Mexican government withdrew funding for subsequent housing clusters, and resources for staffing the Yard were not available. In general, the housing approach, while socially and procedurally innovative, did not adequately contend with the primary need for "the provision of immediate shelter."<sup>3</sup> This unique mode of housing production proved very labor intensive and inadequate to compete with the immediacy of readily available concrete block building components.<sup>4</sup>

Without staffing or a resident architect-builder, the Yard could not function as a maintenance facility or a community center. During their return trip in 1983, Fromm and Bosselmann did note the community members' desire for the Yard to return to its original purpose:

Mrs. Rodriguez would like to see the bond renewed between the families and the university. Right now her roof has a small leak and she is not sure how to fix it. The original concept of a builder's yard, an ongoing repair and building center, still remains a hope to some of the families.<sup>5</sup>

The researchers also pointed out that the operation of the Yard assumed that the idealism of the students initially involved in the project could be maintained in spite of waning governmental and university support.

With this lack of permanent occupancy or consistent activity, the Yard itself became a contentious site in terms of ownership and security. The indefinite status of the Yards' common land made questions of supervision and daily use difficult to define within the community. The open conditions of the Yard also made securing the lot difficult – a problem amplified by the continued ambiguity of its functional relationship to the community. One respondent interviewed in 1983 noted that the “three entrances to what became a common street made it difficult to...question people who wandered through.”<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, Alexander's experiment was flawed in its assessment of the relationship between Builder's yard as institution and the society it might serve. The project began with the “new social institution” of the Yard and expected other social functions to follow. With the removal of external support (monetary and personnel), the Yard could not sustain the activity that had been a part of the process of preliminary construction. It is thus clear that the survival of the Yard requires a consistent (and continued) process of making integral to its formulation. In Mexicali, the procedural and functional change from new construction to maintenance did not have parallel activities to help make the transition. Alexander had envisioned many uses<sup>7</sup> that would have helped in this shift, but they were not pre-existing and in the end were not supported by the Yard's infrastructure, which emphasized the process of making (rather than consuming, etc.). While part of its difficulties, the Yard's formulation as a workshop also defined its potency within the community, particularly in its framing a relationship between process and visualization.

### Review of Successes in the Builder's Yard

The Builder's Yard succeeded in making visible the design and construction process. The Mexicali project exposed linkages between thinking about and making houses without instrumentalizing housing production. Alexander's original description of the Yard's functions affirm this correlation: (1) to provide the “group of architect-builders with a home base,” (2) to supply a “base in which the building system resides...its buildings...serve as an example of what various details look like,” (3) to give a context “from which this building process can be generated,” (4) to house physically the “pattern language which the families use to design their houses,” and (5) to contain “all ongoing records of the actual building process...records of bills, quantities spent, cost control, hours worked.”<sup>8</sup> The Builder's Yard included all of the attributes associated with design and construction, from “architect” to “client,” from builder to design tools, from construction and project administration to conceptual and material experimentation.

The focus on activities and operations also allows for the expanded role of making to define both design and construction. Organizationally and sequentially, this emphasis is formalized in Alexander's idea of “step-by-step construction,” axiomatically summarized in his definition of the building system “in terms of the actions needed to produce a building, not in terms of the physical components.”<sup>9</sup> Here, visualization is not achieved through an image but a with a process. Understood to complement his design “patterns,” the operations ultimately subsume the imagery of the pattern language because of the their immediacy and intimacy with context and material. Operations outlined for Mexicali included the following: laying out, excavating, preparing, erecting (columns and walls), installing, weaving, placing (foundations,

services, and roofing coats), painting, and laying floor. Overall, these actions define for Alexander “a new kind of building process: one which unfolds while the house is being built, and which is easy to understand and transparently obvious in the way it fits together.”<sup>10</sup> Although its novelty is arguable, the potency of this type of procedural organization for visualizing construction is evident in the project’s documentation and in the success of subsequent pedagogical design-build models.

## Questions of Time and Scale

As a prelude to proposing how the Builder’s Yard model might be revised and re-applied in a contemporary urban context, two questions might be asked: should the Builder’s Yard be temporary or permanent and what scale should the Yard be? Alexander responds to the former question with the absolute statement: “in the end, the builder’s yard only makes sense if it has a long-term reality in a neighborhood.”<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that this unquestioned idea of permanence contributed to the Mexicali Yard’s difficulties, but such a claim is difficult to prove. Alternatively, a higher degree of flexibility for the space’s use might have allowed the site to continue as a community focus. Alexander addresses the scale question primarily in terms of possible programs within the Builder’s Yard. He outlines the following programmatic scales: temporary house for the architect-builder, low-cost community hardware store (noting an existing project in the Philippines), a local arts center, a center for cooperative industry and grassroots production, and a “modest and effective” network of training centers developed throughout Mexico by Abel Ibanez. Neither of these questions can be definitively answered in terms of the successes/failures of the Mexicali project, but each will be taken up in discussions of the Yard proposed later in this paper.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROPOSED BUILDER’S YARD

In its investigation of the Builder’s Yard, this research seeks to propose a workshop site in Gainesville, Florida, for visualizing community design decisions through the immediacy of processes of making. The conceptual framework for this proposal summarizes differences and similarities with Alexander’s Mexicali project, characterizes the focus on ‘making,’ and looks at related models and precedents for what the Builder’s Yard might become in contemporary urban environments. As an organic extension of the neighborhood, which it serves, the revised Builder’s Yard works between the poetic and the pragmatic, interpretation and empirical research, and thinking and making. These conceptual components are not at all seen as oppositions but are instead understood as possible confluences to be found in the working, process-oriented environment of the Yard. Admittedly, such a proposal remains nested in what might be critiqued as a utopian vision (not unlike Alexander’s idealism), but the identification of differences with Alexander’s venture and similarities with other pre-existing projects seeks to avoid a complete isolation within an idealized scheme.

The context and problem characterize one set of differences between the model proposed here and that of Alexander’s project. The Mexicali project used the Builder’s Yard as a central focus for an entirely new housing development. In contrast, Gainesville’s Yard will be inserted into an existing context with an aged housing stock. Also, Gainesville’s site will be located in a centralized urban context that is static (and in some cases declining in population); and Alexander’s situation was decidedly exurban and rural, although at the time of the project

experiencing a rapid increase in population. The problem of sustainable materials in Gainesville is more readily approached through material re-use, while in Mexicali raw materials could be derived locally. Related to this question of materials is the stringent regulation (and proscription) of building systems through local codes by Florida in particular and the United States in general, as opposed to the less standardized, and thus in many ways less restricted, regulatory system in Mexico. Even though thirty years separate the two projects, the problem of housing remains. However, the framing of this problem does differ notably, particularly once it is recontextualized in the United States with its proliferation of manufactured housing and the changing family structures of home. The objective of the Gainesville project does take into account this problem of housing, but it does so without the goal of wholesale housing production. Instead, the Gainesville Yard will focus on maintenance, experimentation with systems and details, and small-scale interventions. In part, this goal is a response to the restrictions of codes and other regulations; but it is primarily reactive to the specific needs identified in Gainesville itself (addressed in the next part). One other fundamental difference will be addressed in the next section – in the Gainesville project a more explicit emphasis on the relation between thinking and making will be worked out in order to explore the meaning of re-making and existing built and cultural environment.

This focus on making is summarized in the term *poesis*, understood here as a possible convergence of the poetic and the pragmatic. *Poesis*, translated as both ‘making’ and ‘poetry,’ is integrated in the conceptual framework for the Yard as a method not of imitation but of expression.<sup>12</sup> Here, the common distinction between theory and practice can be called into question, and Donald Kunze’s linkage of the two through *praxis* can be explored.<sup>13</sup> With *praxis*, architectural and pedagogical practice focuses on action and exercise as ends in themselves with the possibility of generating external solutions. Similarly, in this formulation, thinking and making are not mutually exclusive but necessarily tied up with each other.<sup>14</sup> In *praxis* and *poesis*, thinking and making occur simultaneously. Alexander notes the tactility (and haptic nature) of the processes made possible in the Yard:

...a feeling that were actually *making* these buildings, not merely designing them, and that we were therefore responsible for every detail in a way that had to be understood through hands and fingers – thoroughly understood, the way a painter understands his paint or a good cook understands the soup by tasting it.<sup>15</sup>

Taken further, the idea of *poesis* is a ‘making visible’ that which was previously hidden or unclear. Such ‘visualization’ has practical and ethical implications for the community and its needs (these will be addressed in the conclusion). Opposing it to *techne*, Martin Heidegger developed *poesis* to describe the bringing forth of a way of knowing the world. In contrast to Alexander’s work, this idea of *poesis* remains more open-ended in its expected results but more specific in its emphasis on *making* as the starting point for community change.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, imagination is the proposed methodology of the Gainesville Yard. In its workshop, a material imagination might allow for the discovery of the poetics of substance<sup>17</sup> and serve as a demonstration of linkages between design and construction and, more broadly, members of a community.

## PROJECTS RELATED TO THE BUILDER'S YARD PROPOSAL

A brief inventory of environments directly and indirectly related to the Builder's Yard outlines possible sites, experiences, and implications for such places. This array of 'yards' (Industrial-Institutional, Popular-Historical, Pedagogical, Social-Communal) is organized by functional context in a preliminary effort to understand the relation between objectives and socio-cultural situation. The projects within each of the groupings are arranged by decreasing scale (from bigger to smaller), defined by societal, cultural, material, and productive impact on local and global communities. Also of note in each category is the degree of permanence associated with each siting; typically, more provisional yards are smaller in scale. Each group is not mutually exclusive; for example, 'Pedagogical' models might be considered a sub-set of 'Institutional.'

### Industrial-Institutional

Occurring primarily at a large scale, industrial-institutional building yards provide sites for commercial and manufacturing processes that for the most part remain at a distance from direct community needs. Operating at a scale that has saturated popular building activity, the home improvement retailer Home Depot has sought to establish a commercial version of the community builder's yard. In addition to retail-based "self-help" classes, Home Depot has developed "Kids Workshops" as a part of their corporate responsibility vision "to invite the community into our stores." This retail form of 'community development' centers on the

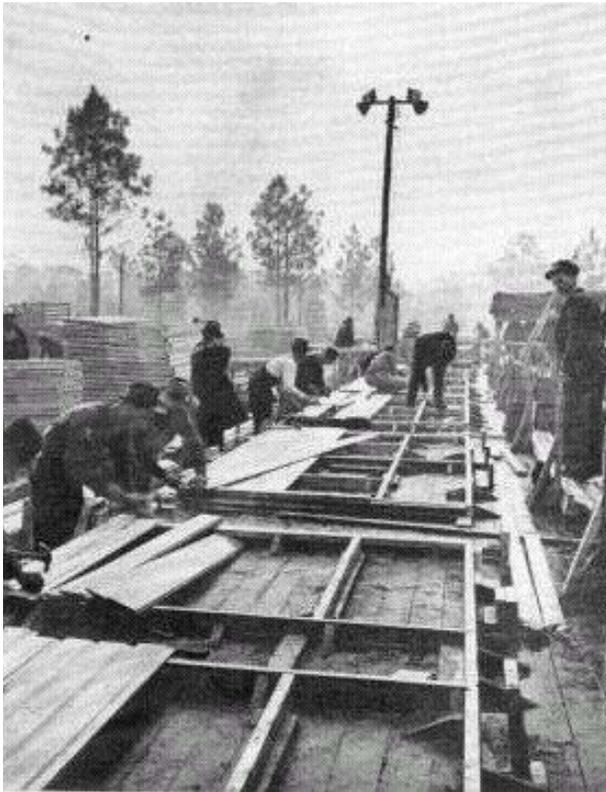


Figure 3. Construction of Camp Blanding, Starke, Florida, 1941  
(Florida Photographic Collection, PR13675)

Workshop in which children aged 6 to 12 are offered free "How-To Clinics." Home Depot's website notes that each child receives a pre-fabricated kit (for making a project such as a wooden birdhouse, a step stool, or a step stool) designed "to be both educational and practical."<sup>18</sup> This sanitized version of the builder's yard arose from an effort by Home Depot to "invite the community into our stores to participate [in] programs that benefit children and adults." Home Depot itself is an example of a mainstream commercial adaptation of the building yard or builder's yard space associated historically with boat-building and more recently with hardware stores and lumber yards. Shipyards have existed throughout the history of boat-building. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Calypso's island becomes a shipyard in which Ulysses assembles building material (twenty timbers), tools (bronze axe, adze, augur), and the raft itself.<sup>19</sup> Shipyards provide the site for laying out, assembling, launching, and maintaining ships; scales range from the intimacy of the famed gondola-building yard Squero di San Trovaso in

Dorsoduro, Venice, Italy, to the massive operations of Henry J. Kaiser, who revolutionized ship-building during World War II. During their rapid process of construction during the War, military camps became large-scale builder's yards. At Camp Blanding in Starke, Florida, thirty buildings were constructed each day with a labor force at times exceeding 7,000 (Figure 3). Such manufactured housing assembled on-site foreshadowed post-war housing production in such projects as Levittown begun in the late 1940s.

## Popular-Historical

In addition to its commercial and industrial iterations, the builder's yard has historically been the locus for representing the relation between work and space. In Canaletto's *The Stonemason's Yard*, the vacant lot of Campo San Vidal picturesquely depicts the rebuilding operations of the neighboring church (Figure 4). The site is a makeshift mason's yard in which children play, masons sculpt stone blocks, and everyday life continues along the Grand Canal. A more restricted, but similarly provisional site, was the demonstration builder's yard at Stuttgart's Weissenhofsiedlung exhibition in 1927. With its purpose to address the housing problem through the artistic and technological offerings of modern industry and design, the Weissenhof exhibition included twenty-one structures designed by seventeen different architects. Included in the exposition was a 'test lot' (*experimentier gelands*) where experiments with building methods and materials were presented and building system mock-ups were shown in the process of their construction. In line with the exhibition's objectives, the test lot demonstrated "constructional techniques and solutions to problems of detail... alongside building materials of the most varied kinds: roofing papers; plywood sheets; woodwool panels...."<sup>20</sup> In essence, this test lot was the culmination of the Werkbund's attempt to revitalize Germany's post-war economy and to synthesize industry while at the same time enhancing craft work. Similarly didactic, although lacking an ideological framework, the builder's yard is the site for the recent English cartoon series *Bob the Builder*. Here, the yard is conceived as a domestic space complete with flower boxes and manicured grounds in which problems are resolved and social gatherings occur.



Figure 4. Antonio Canaletto, *The Stonemasons Yard*, 1728 (National Gallery, London)

## Pedagogical

The builder's yard also serves as a site for pedagogical explorations into the relation between university and community and thinking and making. The Open City in Ritoque, Chile functions as an extension of Catholic University's Valparaiso campus. Allowing for a deep connection between the process of building and education, the Open City has been constructed by university faculty and students from scavenged materials and building components. Integral to the City's process of making is the *travesía*, which serves a dual purpose: to discover valuable connections between the natural and the historical and to inform the ways of making through a process of discovery. The poetic acts of the *travesía* are "group meetings that occur on site and employ poetic methods to initiate discovery and creative processes."<sup>21</sup> The making of poetry stimulates imagination and initiates construction; and *travesías*, as poetic voyages, journeys, or crossings, pull together the immediate as well as the distant. This poetic methodology also links theoretical thought and the pragmatics of "concrete action" by engaging "space, place, and poetry through improvisational activity."<sup>22</sup> The making of the Open City relies on the correspondence between the *poiesis* of this *travesía* and city as *polis*.<sup>23</sup> The Open City itself then becomes a poetic and political act. The builder's yard might then become a city within a city. The work of Tadashi Kawamata works with the urban context, not as a comprehensive design-construction project but as a series of interventions (Figure 5). These 'works in progress' seek to establish a "cultural contract" among citizens, students, artists, and other 'makers.'<sup>24</sup> Involving members of the community and activating the city's public spaces with construction activity, Kawamata's work is both poetic and pragmatic:

...everything was to be utilitarian and practical...simple, unobtrusive, site-specific wooden structures would serve to make walking and sitting more pleasant while at the same time providing public space with a new, more relaxed ambience. Its functionality would allow physical participation in the work...Thanks to the simplicity of the constructions, anyone could help build them, a further means of active involvement in the project.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 5.** Tadashi Kawamata, Workshop Schulhaus Sternmatt, Baar, Switzerland, 1998 (*Tadashi Kawamata Work in Progress in Zug*)

With this activation of public space, the intervention becomes a temporal builder's yard. In the United States, design-build studios and programs also provide pedagogically charged versions of builder's yards within each project's construction site. In addition to connections between thought and action, design-build programs provide an educational forum for university-community dialogues as described in *University-Community Design Partnerships: Innovations in Practice*.<sup>26</sup> The builder's yard model's possible connections to design-build pedagogy will be discussed in the conclusion.

## Social-Communal

Playgrounds and community gardens are two additional communal environments that share characteristics with the builder's yard. Johan Huizinga outlined characteristics of play as a cultural function. Play is freedom, a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, play is delimited by rules and in terms of locality and duration. According to Huizinga, just as the play-ground environment is ordered, the play-community becomes permanent over time. The playground, like the festival, provides the momentary extraordinary space lodged within quotidian activities.<sup>28</sup> For Henri Lefebvre, the community-wide celebratory space of the festival represents the "privileged moment" of recreation connected to yet apart from the everyday and completes his optimistic vision of a "future society of abundance, increased leisure, and personal liberty, grounded in everyday desires and needs."<sup>29</sup> As a type of urban festival for children, the 'adventure playgrounds' of the United Kingdom and other areas of Europe provide an important parallel with builder's yards and their connection to visualization and imagination. Adventure playgrounds began in 1943 as 'junk playgrounds' in Denmark. Understood as places for children's experimentation with materials and space, these playgrounds did not seek to change world views but instead emphasized play as a way to encourage a child's imagination.<sup>30</sup> Junk playgrounds also served as an urban strategy that reclaimed unwanted lots and re-activated derelict urban terrain. These playgrounds were also a form of construction site in which children were given salvaged materials to explore and re-make the urban space (Figure 6). Robin C. Moore has noted that adventure and junk playgrounds, with their focus on making, facilitated the fusion of play and learning, which accounts for social integration and environmental experience and education.<sup>31</sup> The idea of play offers an important transformative element to Alexander's original Builder's Yard model in its involvement of all ages and the multiple uses that can be



*Figure 6.* Adventure Playground, n.d. (Robin Moore, *Adventure Playgrounds and Children's Creativity*)

generated with an open-ended playground landscape. Community gardens also provide an environment sympathetic to the temporal and process-oriented spaces of play and construction. New York's spaces of community gardening established in the early 1970s by the Green Guerillas are not unlike Denmark's junk playgrounds in the re-making of vacant lots. Playing and gardening are activities that are connected methodologically and experientially with the process of making within a community's built environment through the topics of education, experimentation, and fabrication.

## PROPOSED BUILDER'S YARD FOR GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

### Purpose

The purpose of the Builder's Yard in Gainesville is to provide a community space for education, experimentation, fabrication, and play. In this project, *making* will serve as the fundamental mode of imagining (and visualizing) community design and construction alternatives. This space is intended to be both active in its outreach to the adjacent neighborhoods and reflective as a medium for research. The Gainesville Yard also seeks to work between university and community needs and objectives, creating a space for dialogues among citizens, students, and professionals.

### Site

The following sites will be considered for the Builder's Yard in Gainesville (Figure 7):

- [1] 222 NW 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue: Warehouse and property owned by McGurn Investment Company
- [2] Corner of SE 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Terrace, McRorie Community Garden
- [3] Corner of NW 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Dreamers Community Garden



*Figure 7.* Map of locations of three sites in Gainesville, Florida

All of the sites are close to downtown Gainesville (Main Street and University Avenue). Site [1] is 1/8 mile from downtown, site [2] is less than 1/4 mile from the main intersection, and site [3] is within a 1/2 mile of downtown. The McGurn site [1] includes a 3600sf warehouse with a 1200sf open covered space (Figure 8). It is located at the southeastern corner of the Pleasant Street Historic District, an African-American neighborhood. The McRorie Community Garden [2] is located on property owned by Gainesville Regional Utilities and is administered by the city's Recreation and Parks Department (Figure 9). The Garden is immediately west of the Southeast Historic District. Dreamers Garden [3] is the community garden project of the Grove Street neighborhood association (Figure 10). It is located in a commercially zoned area west of Main Street near Publix supermarket.



**Figure 8.** Warehouse at the corner of 222 NW 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue in Gainesville, Florida (Photo: Richard Blakeslee)



**Figure 9.** Sculpture and garden tools at McRorie Community Garden, corner of SE 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Terrace, Gainesville, Florida (Photo: author)



**Figure 10.** Building materials assembled at Dreamers Community Garden, corner of NW 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Gainesville, Florida (Photo: author)

## Context and Program

Each site lends itself to the combination of playground, community garden, and builder's yard. The McGurn site [1] does not currently have any plantings or grass areas on its ¾-acre lot in area of parking lots that would benefit from a green space. Also, the Pleasant Street district does not have a community garden. While the Grove Street and the Southeast Historic district sites [2,3] do include community gardens, neither neighborhood has a dedicated playground area. The McGurn site [1] is the most centrally located site and would provide the most space for construction, gardening and playground activity. Also, its pre-existing warehouse would provide an ideal space for storing materials and experimenting with modes of making.

The proximity of sites [1] and [2] to historic districts makes them possible places for the addressing the problem of maintaining and modifying structures administered by design guidelines. Transcripts from recent Historic Board meetings point to difficulties of residents of the Pleasant Street neighborhood in being able to carry out the types of construction required by the historic design guidelines. In one particular example, window modifications proved to be too costly for one resident who wanted to open up an exterior wall to admit more light. In another case, a resident needed to erect a fence around residential property but was unable to locate an affordable builder who was knowledgeable about the requirements of the guidelines. The builder's yard might serve as a place to help fund, visualize, and construct such residential modifications.

In all of the sites, the Builder's Yard could also serve as a place to fabricate necessary house components. In the Pleasant Street district, one recognized need is for screen doors to allow for proper ventilation without giving up privacy. Screen doors are also a necessity to keep mosquito populations outside. The Builder's Yard might also become a design and materials laboratory for the School of Architecture.

## Connection to Existing Institutions

The Gainesville Builder's Yard would benefit from connections to the University of Florida and the Florida Community Design Center. Faculty and students from School of Architecture and the College of Design, Construction, and Planning could help staff the Builder's Yard, but the Yard would also be set up to facilitate its function without constant staffing. The university might also offer a solution to the problem of liability associated with a construction site. The community gardens suggest a model in which community members have access to the site, but storage and site buildings are secured when the site is not staffed. The Florida Community Design Center also provides community resources that would allow exhibitions of work produced at the Yard and might accommodate meetings with other community members.

## Addressing Issues of Housing (Future Research)

It suffices to compare a model of the Usonian home to what today falls under the rubric of 'affordable housing' to wonder why the nation as a whole ignores its poets. The consequences of such neglect are immeasurable, for when a nation loses its poets it loses access to the meaning of dwelling. When it loses the meaning of dwelling, it loses the means to build. By the same vicious logic, when it loses the means to build, dwelling itself loses its meaning. No amount of running water or safe wiring can of itself turn a house into a home, for when a nation ignores its poets it becomes a nation of the homeless.<sup>32</sup>

The Builder's Yard in Gainesville, while perhaps not able to change the housing system, might influence the way that houses are understood and eventually made. The combination of imagination and demonstration (discussed below) allowed for in the Yard's conceptual framework can enter the mode of housing delivery either through a design-build studio in association with the School of Architecture or through smaller-scale modifications to houses as needed by community members. With the ongoing experimentation and emphasis on making, the banality of maintenance might become a poetic practice in which the smallest-scale modifications begin to make room for the meaning that Harrison identifies in a quotation that could serve as the directive for the synthesis of the poetic and pragmatic that is the ultimate goal of the Builder's Yard.

## CONCLUSIONS

The idealism and utopianism of the 'social institution' is an easy target in today's post-modern, exceedingly post-industrial United States; however, the tangibility of the process of the making does hold potential for visualizing design and construction practices. It is this focus on process that allows for a flexible program of education, play, and fabrication. The unfinished nature of the Yard's project was acknowledged by Alexander, "the process not only builds the houses, but repairs them...[t]he houses are never finished; they exist, in an imperfect state, constantly changing and improving, just as we ourselves also exist in an imperfect state, constantly struggling to improve ourselves."<sup>33</sup>

As a 21<sup>st</sup>-century community center, the Builder's Yard becomes a public node of communication,<sup>34</sup> a unique educational institution that bridges City and University resources, and an organic extension of neighborhood in its open-ended programmatic potential. The paper will also review the expected contributions to the community, both local and global. Beneficial attributes include the improvement of housing choices and maintenance, the activation and reinterpretation of "public space," and the promotion of sustainability through regionally appropriate methods and methods.

The Builder's Yard allows for simultaneous activities of imagination and demonstration. Such 'imaginative demonstration' has the potential to redefine the construction of buildings by reconnecting the processes of thinking, visualizing, and making. In the Yard's intensively defined locus, local interpretations might yield more global demonstrations of the relation of *making* to communal environments.

## ENDNOTES

## REFERENCES

- Alexander, Christopher. *The Production of Houses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Angelil, Marc M. "The Concepts of Natural and Artificial Production in Architecture." *Center 8* (1993): 85-99.
- Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1962.
- Carpenter, William J., ed. *Learning by Building: Design and Construction in Architectural Education*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997.

- Coker, Coleman. "An Intent of Constructing: [of] Constructing an Intent." *Mockbee Coker: Thought and Process*. Ed. Lori Ryker. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995. 57-73.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn, 1958.
- Fromm, Dorit and Peter Bosselmann. "Mexicali Revisited: Seven Years Later." *Places*. Volume 1, Number 4. 78-90.
- Greenwood, Davyyd J. and Morten Levin. *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998.
- Grindley, William. "Owner-Builders: Survivors of the Future." *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process*. Eds. John F.C. Turner and Robert Fichter. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
- International Playground Association. *Adventure Playgrounds and Children's Creativity*. Report to the Sixth International Conference held at the University Bucconi, Milan, Italy (1975). Sheffield: The Association, 1976.
- Linn, Karl. "Commentary on Mexicali." *The Scope of Social Architecture*. Ed. C. Richard Hatch. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984. 132-3.
- Moore, Robin C. "The Place of Adventure Play in Urban Planning for Leisure." *Adventure Playgrounds and Children's Creativity*. Report to the Sixth International Conference held at the University Bucconi, Milan, Italy (1975). Sheffield: The Association, 1976. 16-25.
- Pendleton-Jullian, Ann M. *The Road Is Not a Road and the Open City, Ritoque, Chile*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.
- Seelig, Michael. *The Architecture of Self-Help Communities*. New York: Architectural Record Books, 1978.
- Senda, Mitsuru. *Design of Children's Play Environments*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992.
- Stevens, Robert William, ed. *Community Self-Help Housing Manual: Partnership in Action*. Croton-on-Hudson: Intermediate Technology Group of North America, 1982.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander's initial studies of patterns and design included *Houses Generated By Patterns* (1969) and *A Pattern Language Which Generates Multi-Service Centers* (1968), both published through the Center For Environmental Structure in Berkeley, California. This research was subsequently published as *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Dorit Fromm and Peter Bosselmann, "Mexicali Revisited: Seven Years Later," *Places*. Volume 1, Number 4, 80.

<sup>3</sup> Fromm and Bosselmann write, "We wanted to create a process that enables settlers to build and design their own homes, a process that created environments that were beautiful and whole. We tried to create a community through the builder's yard and the cluster – and both did not work." (88)

<sup>4</sup> In the end, the pressed cement blocks used very little earthen soil to form the mixture.

<sup>5</sup> Fromm and Bosselmann, 86.

<sup>6</sup> Fromm and Bosselmann, 88

<sup>7</sup> Alexander's proposed uses for the Mexicali Builder's Yard after housing construction was complete included "community center, school, playground, church, dance hall, café, whatever seems appropriate: at this stage, most of the tools have gone, and it contains only a minimum kit of tools needed for routine repairs." (98)

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, 95-97.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander, 222.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, 116.

<sup>12</sup> I use *poesis* in John Ruskin's revision of the term as opposed to Plato's definition as strictly imitation (*Republic*).

---

<sup>13</sup> Donald Kunze, “Stopstopstopstopstop,” *Gravity*, Pamphlet Architecture 25, ed. J. Cathcart, F. Fantauzzi, T. Van Elslander (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> We might take as an example Paul Valery’s working definition of poetics as “the mind at work making works of the mind” (*Aesthetics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander notes, “We have tried to construct a housing process in which human feeling and human dignity come first, in which the housing process is reestablished as the fundamental human process in which people integrate their values and themselves, in which they form social bonds, in which they become anchored in the earth...” (78).

<sup>17</sup> See Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, trans. Edith Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> The website is [http://www.homedepot.com/HDUS/EN\\_US/corporate/corp\\_respon/kids\\_workshops.shtml](http://www.homedepot.com/HDUS/EN_US/corporate/corp_respon/kids_workshops.shtml). Home Depot notes that “more than 555,000 children built their first toolbox at The Home Depot.” According to the website, attendance at Kids Workshops (which occur the first Saturday of each month) averages 150 children at each of its 1,800 stores, making this corporate phenomenon’s social and cultural implications difficult to ignore. The website also notes the following: “In addition to the newly constructed project kit, each child receives a kid-sized orange apron, similar to a Home Depot associate’s apron and an achievement pin.” Discussions of corporate power, promotional ethics, and branding are outside the scope of this paper; however, this example does point toward the efficacy of *making* to generate interest among children and adults. And the idea of promoting a sense of accomplishment through making is certainly an important aspect to the builder’s yard (Website accessed 27 February 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 5, 346-50.

<sup>20</sup> Karin Kirsch, *The Weissenhofsiedlung: Experimental Housing Built for the Deutscher Werkbund, Stuttgart, 1927* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 30-1. Kirsch quotes Heinz and Bodo Rasch from their *Wie Bauen* text of 1927: “On the test lot at the Werkbund exhibition the whole range of experimentation was brought together and offered to the critical scrutiny of the still wary visitor. Much is still developing, and not yet ready. But, by and large, people went away with the impression that a new technology is beginning to blossom, and that the old must sooner or later give way to it.”

<sup>21</sup> Ann M. Pendleton-Jullian, *The Road Is Not a Road and the Open City, Ritoque, Chile* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 46.

<sup>22</sup> Pendleton-Jullian, 85-7.

<sup>23</sup> Pendleton-Jullian, 143. *Poiesis* is the action or faculty of producing or doing something especially creatively. Pendleton-Jullian notes the implied emphasis on process or the “act of creativity” as opposed to the result. In her discussion of *polis*, Indra Kagis McEwen notes that the construction (as opposed to *chora*) was “allowed to appear as a surface woven by the activity of its inhabitants; with processions to sanctuaries providing linkages to the territorial edges.” McEwen argues that the *polis* was “emergent” and “made” in addition to being influenced by colonization (*Socrates’ Ancestor: An Essay in Architectural Beginning*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, 80-1).

<sup>24</sup> “‘Work in Progress’ has gathered momentum and led to...synergy effects. A socio-spatial network evolved. Retrospectively, the...project has been a collective growth process. Kawamata managed to set and keep an entire city in motion. ‘Work in Progress’ – conceived of as a structure, a work, a creation undergoing constant change and renewal through the involvement of various partners of a ‘contrat cultural’ – became a metaphor for the city.” Matthias Haldemann, ed. *Tadashi Kawamata: Work in Progress in Zug* (Zug: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000), 45.

<sup>25</sup> Haldemann, 39. Haldemann quotes Kawamata, “Art must penetrate the societal power structure.”

<sup>26</sup> Jason Pearson, *University-Community Design Partnerships: Innovations in Practice* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002). See also William J. Carpenter, ed. *Learning by Building: Design and Construction in Architectural Education*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Callois has defined play as a free and voluntary activity that occurs in a pure space, isolated and protected from the rest of life. (*Man, Play, and Games*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

<sup>29</sup> Mary McCleod, “Henri Lefebvre’s Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction,” *Architecture of the Everyday*, eds. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 16, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Mitsuru Senda’s defines one aspect of Adventure Spaces: “These are spaces full of confusion, such as rubbish dumps and construction sites. They serve to stimulate children’s imagination.” (*Design of Children’s Play Environments*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 98). Related indirectly to the Adventure Playground is the Reggio Emilia approach where the school space creates conditions for learning rather than dictating the course of education.

---

The plan of Reggio schools, with its ateliers and gardens, might be read as a pedagogically charged ‘adventure playground,’ or a builder’s yard.

<sup>31</sup> Robin C. Moore, “The Place of Adventure Play in Urban Planning for Leisure,” *Adventure Playgrounds and Children’s Creativity*. Report to the Sixth International Conference held at the University of Bucon, Milan, Italy, 1975 (Sheffield: The Association, 1976), 16-25. The following elements make up Moore’s model (described as “overlapping concepts”): (1) adventure play (materials, tools, users), (2) adventure environment (organization of playground), and (3) play leadership (links to site and community).

<sup>32</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 238.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Linn paraphrases Christopher Alexander in “Commentary on Mexicali.” *The Scope of Social Architecture*. Ed. C. Richard Hatch. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984. 132-3.

<sup>34</sup> Communications, both actual and virtual, could be integrated into the Gainesville Builder’s Yard. Each of the three communities is underserved by Internet technologies, such that the Yard might also become a locus for publicly available electronic connectivity.