PARTICIPATORY ACTION-ORIENTED DESIGN AS A CATALYST FOR A CANADIAN COOPERATIVE HOUSING RENAISSANCE

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Can a design methodology activate
A Canadian housing cooperative renaissance?
Objectives:

- Produce alternative designs for coop reconfiguration
- Demonstrate a mixed use social economy model
- Test the hypothesis that design catalyzes action toward sustainability

Hillside trail north of the Sunnyhill Co-operative in winter
Intended outcomes:

- Enhancement of internal capacity
- Document incorporated into Vision 2020 exercise
- Design generates next steps
- Creation of an action research model

*Hillside trail north of the Sunnyhill Co-operative in winter*
Canadian Housing Cooperatives

- Non-market housing
- Members do not own equity
- Subsidy/surcharge model
- 2200 coops / 92,000 units / 200,000 residents

Residential neighbourhood to the west of the Sunnyhill Co-operative
Canadian Coop Housing History

• 100 year history of housing coops in Canada
• First family coop housing established in 1966
• Canadian Housing Federation founded by the Canadian Labour Congress and Canadian Cooperatives Association in 1968
• National Housing Act and CMHC supports coop housing boom from 1969 to 1992
• Federal government funding cut in 1992

*Residential neighbourhood to the west of the Sunnyhill Co-operative*
The 2020 Vision Project

“The co-ops we live in are getting older. The needs of co-op members are changing. With very few exceptions, we are not adding new co-ops to our sector”

“What kind of a co-op do you want to be in the year 2020?”
Sunnyside neighbourhood

- Inner city neighbourhood
- Circa 1900
- 5000 residents
Sunnyhill Housing Cooperative

- 66 units
- Established 30 years ago
- Mortgage expires in 20 years
- Land lease expires in 30 years
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EVDS 702: Advanced Environmental Design Practice

The fundamental goal of 702 is to provide students with an opportunity to tackle contemporary environmental design challenges as part of an interdisciplinary design team.
Method

Two stages to the research: Design and Evaluation
Design

applying participatory action research methods to engage student designers and community members in the design process
Evaluation

Did design method act as a catalyst?  
What was it about the design method that made it work?  
What is the nature of participatory design?
Design Process: The Charette
Design Process: Midterm Review
Design Process: Final Presentation
Evaluation:

- Student Survey
- Resident Survey
- Student Focus Group
- Resident Focus Group
“I never received a notice like that before - we receive 4 or 5 a month. To receive a block told me this is going to be creative and interesting.”

Coop Resident

“It was so much fun, what do I do with my block - where does this fit. Before I arrived I thought it would fit in a certain place or something. I was thinking the rest would be established. I wasn’t thinking in the bigger picture - that everyone would be wondering where to put [their block]”

Coop Resident
Does this process have to start at values?

“We set out at the beginning to make a vision and [values] came up. [Values] is sort of a necessary building block. You can go in so many directions, its so open, you have to ground yourself in something, it seemed like an obvious step at that point.”

EVDS Student
“The excitement we tapped into was important - the invites and the blocks and the colours . . . We were dealing with an established community and it was important to engage them”

“The hands on blocks exercises gathered more about values than spatial organization - when things became spatial it brought out value decisions through arranging blocks - things that didn’t matter weren’t brought to the forefront - it forced people to make choices”
“we put a lot of trust into it when they told us that was a good way of living and was worth sustaining. We believed that, and that was important”

EVDS Students

“Those students were fantastic, they were encouraging to us. You never felt like this is our project and you guys need to be cooperative because we need to get this project done. They were all excited when the charette was happening. Their energy was palpable.”

Coop Resident
“we pushed people outside of their comfort zone.”

“Was it critical to establish that trust? Yes. You’re familiar enough that you can try something new with somebody and take that step together”

EVDS Student
“we usually spend so much time hammering out one sentence in two hour meetings and to only be asked to participate and creative and think and talk and share ideas without any letters to write or reports to complete..... and somebody comes back to you and goes here look at this. Wow!”

Coop Resident
“We could have shown them thirty different futures that would have [excited] them. So it’s not the specific design proposal but the fact that there was one that had the most impact. In a way the same thing [happened] with the charrette, it wasn’t the activities we did but the fact there were activities.”

EVDS Student
“The charette focused on design. It took us in a different direction than processes and policies... let's talk about what do we look like.”

Coop Resident

“It’s not necessarily the exercises we did in the tent that pointed towards the design methodology, but the fact that, we right away decided we were going to set up a tent... I think the key is that we had an event”

EVDS Student
“they completely awakened us up to our environment not just our buildings. Oh we have a bluff and oh we have a river on the other side, we are part of Sunnyside community, and now that gives us a completely different perspective”

Coop Resident
“So people are having a conversation, when we are at meeting and people are like have you seen those? I don’t know about the modules, I kind of like this better... I don’t know if we need that kind of a pond and what do we want with the hill? How does that bluff fit into it because we never talk about the bluff as part of the coop.”

Coop Resident
“Challenge is to consider that we have a role to play as the east gate of Sunnyside as the welcoming portal on the east end of that connects downtown with the NW Calgary, I don’t know whether any of us ever had that in our heads before”

Coop Resident
"one of the things this did inspire with one of our coop members . . .

‘I see a coop school and already we are generating ideas – we hook up with Calgary Coop- we hook up with First Calgary because we actually have a location that is a living coop and we get support to teach kids and aldermen, go to coop school and they come and they spend a week and they find out how do coops work.’

Coop Resident
“We have been putting money aside to redo things that have to be done – our kitchens, our appliances . . . Now when we are doing the 2010 budget in our back pocket we would say.... we wanna redo our windows, they are chilly and cold and drafty . . . [But] why would we sink 300,000 into redoing windows if in fact what we want is totally new buildings.”

“The newer members who are thinking whoa! This is why I moved into a coop”

Coop Residents
“One thing that strikes me too is this kind of continuum of study and play, or of scientific method and artistic method and where does design sit . . . . it may be on the more playful end or maybe on the more studied scientific end . . . . but there’s still rigour”

EVDS Student
Summary of Main Findings:

- A Cooperative/Social Economy vision of a Mixed Urban Community
- Values convergence between students and coop members was vital
- Participatory process combined design skills of students with experiential knowledge of the coop
- Successful Catalyst? Yes. Changed attitudes. Changed and expanded perceptions. Inspired action
Summary of Main Findings:

• Design process attuned coop members to the importance and potential of its context

• The Coop has moved from an inward-looking to a more expansive and ambitious perspective.

• Clarification of missing pieces: Financial management, advocacy and member recruitment

• Design makes a difference – an embodied event.
Activity Theory

Mind – body – spatialization

Embodiment and pleasure - place

Embedded or chained activities
Activity Theory

three iterations of the subject-objective-tool dynamic:

1. *Instructor* (subject) – *Student learning* (objective) – *design action research pedagogy* (tool)

2. *Students* (subject) – *coop member mobilization* (objective) – *design method* (tool)

3. *Coop membership* (subject) – *coop transformation* (objective) – *design method* (tool)
“They never had been able to see Sunnyhill except with those buildings - never been able to get around that particular idea”

EVDS Student

“I think what is did was change the social dynamics”

EVDS Student

“Its given us a new sense of the extent to which we can dream”

Coop Resident