



Planning and Designing an Ideal Community Center: A Response to Rural Conditions

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Abstract

Community centers are very common facilities in different parts of the world especially in rural settings. They play an important role in communities where they are, the most important being places for social interaction. This research paper looks at how the rural setting where such centers are situated affects the planning and design thereof. This accounts for the uniqueness and variation of community centers the world over, as no two communities are the same. A review of literatures on community centers show no specifics on designing a typical center. However, there are general insights on design-responsive methods in planning and designing a community center. Some of these methods involve surveys, interviews and general study of the culture and demography of the community. Information gotten from these methods can provide a complex framework needed in the design. The idea is to create a common space for the community that meets the need of the indigenes.

Keywords

Community center, rural conditions, design-responsive

Introduction

The idea of communities in its original sense is lost in modern societies today. Modern societies feature speed, agitation, urbanization and densification as against the ethnicity, religious and cultural traits of communities. This sometimes makes it difficult for design a community center that reflects the culture and demography of such communities as it becomes difficult to ascertain what these are.

It becomes imperative to deduce issues that can define a community. Architecture can be a tool to stimulate unique communities. The concept of Community Architecture addresses issues pertaining to ageing population and urbanization.

Literature Review

Community centers are very common facilities in different parts of the world especially in rural settings. These have important roles to play in the entire composition of such communities. According to Xu, Gao, and Yan (2005), “Community services are widely accepted as effective solutions to social and economic problems. In addition, community centers are essential in service delivery in communities as seen in the volume of literature on how to build communities and the programs that are in these centers. Xu, Gao and Yan (2005) do not give specifics as to how the building itself provides this backbone. The actual physical structure and the features that are inside play a large part.

To some people, the design of a building and its interior might not be of major concern. The programs and activities happening in the building is of greater concern to such persons. This is common in struggling rural communities and can be detrimental. A community center is one of such things that can be easily compromised in terms of design and funding. The nature and function of a community center demands that resources are properly utilized.

Yasmin and Parvin (2008) state, “A community center (CC) provides spaces for people with similar interest but often vary from social, religious and political backgrounds who come to play, to learn, or to work together for personal satisfaction and/or community improvements” (p. 125). It can truly be a place created for the equal and unbiased participation for everyone in the community. Therefore, it should be a building that takes into account all of the participants and their needs and desires. To put a limit on this for various reasons is in essence limiting the very potential of the participants. A community center provides a space where the only requirement is the desire to be present and partake of what it offers.

Importance of Design

The importance of planning and designing in integrating spaces for a community cannot be overemphasized. This is seen in an article written in 1984, almost 28 years ago by Randolph Hester (as cited in Shin, 2004, p.14). ‘In the past ten years designers have been awakened to the

plight of the users of ill designed spaces everywhere. They have begun to realize that it is critical to design the space near one's home in response to one's idiosyncratic needs'. It has been shown that design and planning must be user-oriented, that the design of the neighborhood space must relate to the behavior patterns and values of the people for whom that space is designed, not the values of the designer. The plans for those environments that are criticized because they did not respond to user needs are many and infamous.

Regardless of economic downturn, there is still an obligation and desperate need to take into account the design of all components of the building and its intended effect, particularly for a community center designed specifically for a variety of user. This approach requires more of us as professionals and practitioners. This entails considering more than just what those heading up the project want in the environment, what it is to look like, or what the leaders want participants to accomplish. It demands thinking more deeply about the needs of participants, directors, builders/funders, the environment, and all involved. Then it calls for adapting our own ideology to accomplish this goal.

Many elements of the building require consideration and adaptation, such as: design, intended use, inside features, furniture, etc. However, little research shows what has been successful regarding these components in the past for a rural community center. A design student echoes some of my own feelings and conclusions. Shin (2004, p.7) explains, "I have found plenty of articles expounding on public *open* space, its virtues, how to design it, etc. However, with community centers, I find very little cohesive literature saying 'here, this is a community center' or 'necessary ingredients for a community center'".

One possible reason for the lack of concrete literature on community centers and why there is no solid plan for Malad to follow is for the simple reason that there is no one right way to do it. Every community is made up of unique individuals, situations, desires, hopes, and more. A list of what a community center should or should not have would not necessarily apply to multiple settings. Each area is different and it is only by accounting for these differences that a new building be a useful tool for the community. Instead of trying to find literature on the perfect community center, sources for how to create a design that will work for the community will inform the literature review.

Building Design and Social Impact

A few researchers combine into a narrower topic the subjects of building design and social impact. Peter C. Lippman (2010) brings much insight to this field. He says:

...the design process must focus on the role of the social environment and how the physical environment may be structured to support learning and assist facilitators and learners in their work. This calls for research to examine existing settings so as to understand how they function, as well as to identify the social patterns that emerge from the activities that occur in learning environments. By conducting research, these activity patterns can be identified; they may then be used to inform the designer who then can recommend what the appropriate spatial arrangements might be (p. 5).

Lippman (2010) urges the designers to acknowledge and act as if there is much more to the process than just constructing a building and putting furniture inside. Discovering the various activity patterns for a community would be an effective way to understanding the social impact. Using a responsive design approach would be an appropriate and useful perspective to take in order to accomplish this.

This type of method allows for both practice theory and responsive commissioning to take place. Practice theory is an educational ideology. It describes the relationship between learner and environment. Responsive commissioning is concerned with the exchange between the social and physical aspects of the learning environment (Lippman, 2010). Lippman (2010) describes the responsive design approach as one which, “understands the transactional relationship between learners and their learning environment and that sustainable design does not merely signify the integration of green principles, but rather how the learning environment – social and physical – can contribute to the development of the learner”(p.4). By taking into consideration both the physical and social aspects, the design of a building will be better. It can become a building which is not only aware of the learners, but also the multiple roles it fulfills. I will utilize this approach to conduct my research on determining the essential elements for a future community center in Malad.

Community Participation

In order to achieve the goal of creating a space which can be fully utilized, it is important to do so with full participation from the community. This is essential when using a responsive design approach. As shown by Toker and Toker (2006), “involving users in the planning and design processes are advantageous not only for the users since it generates customized outcomes, but also for the planners and designers, since it maximizes user satisfaction with the product” (p. 163). This is also illustrated in a youth center project worked on by Shin (2004); she states: “I do not wish to neglect the literature out there that stresses the importance of listening to the communities that a design is intended to serve. Community input, meetings, and overall clear communication of needs by future users to the designer has become more and more valued” (p.14). Community participation is at the heart of using responsive design. As specified by both Tokers and Shin there are many benefits to be gained from involving users in the process.

Developing a channel for a communication of needs creates a situation that is a win-win for all parties. It can be accomplished by using guidelines such as participation, collaboration, consensus, and action (Toker & Toker, 2006, p. 159). These guidelines along with the above mentioned techniques are an important part of creating an effective community space that can be used for the betterment of society.

From exploring the literature on this topic it is clear that there is a need for more research to be done on the actual use and benefits of using a responsive design approach in building community centers. As shown from the current research this would be a worthy topic to pursue. As an example, the University Of Kansas School Of Architecture and Urban Planning and the Porch 7th Ward Cultural Organization currently take this approach. These two organizations began collaborating after Hurricane Katrina. They wanted to rebuild using this tactic for design assistance and build pedagogy. This helped with community cohesion and lead to sociocultural empowerment. The organizations undertook several projects with much consideration and community participation. The results from this approach were a success for rebuilding both buildings and a community after this natural disaster (Corser & Gore, 2008).

Conclusion

Centers are an important part of any community. The literature provides insight into how a community center can be designed. As shown through the research they are more useful when certain elements are taken into consideration. These elements are the relationship between learner and the social and physical environment. Each interaction and its various aspects need to be examined closely. This is known as using a responsive design approach. The most effective way of implementing a responsive design approach is through discovering the opinions and feelings in a community. This helps to ensure the overall building design is both appropriate and adequately provides for the various uses community members have in mind.

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