PUTTING PARTICIPATION INTO PRACTICE: STRATEGIES FOR EVOLVING ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT

For decades, schools of architecture have included hands-on education in their curricula in the form of design-build studios; often these studio experiences are guided by a social mission and employ participatory methods. In other cases, university community design centers provide opportunities for students to engage with community members on real-world projects. My own academic experience (which was far from unusual) involved the former, beginning with a summer studio focused on asset-based community development and participatory engagement framed within a design-build experience that launched me on a career-long path.

Being confronted with a profession that conducts business as usual while academia is grooming a generation of socially responsible architects is jarring for new graduates. Today's professionals approaching mid-career are unsatisfied with outdated business models that do not address contemporary concerns about social impact. Barriers to participatory engagement in practice include hourly billing that discourages clients from commissioning non-mandatory stakeholder engagement, as well as a culture of pro-bono work that ultimately accelerates burnout and devalues professional services. New ways of thinking require new ways of doing business.

Today's practitioners are seeking more sustainable methods of integrating the participatory strategies they employed in academia into contemporary practice. Drawing on extensive research conducted on the history of community design during my Master of Architecture, and using illustrations from my own path—from a student during the post-Katrina era to owning a community design practice—I propose strategies for challenging current models of practice. Specifically, I demonstrate how my current work with private landowners and nonprofit economic development groups incorporates participatory methods learned during my academic experience, borrowing from an interdisciplinary range of sources, including anthropology, sociology, and planning, as well as others who are disrupting the status quo of delivering creative services.

Keywords: Capacity Building, Community Design, FORM Coalition, Participatory Design, Pedagogy, Pro Bono

1. INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago in August, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. At the time, I was just beginning my second year of architecture school at Virginia Tech. I didn't realize it then, but this single event had a defining impact on the trajectory of my career. Future spring breaks were punctuated with design-build trips to help with the relief effort. In subsequent seminar classes and studio projects, we closely examined the role of architecture in society. During a summer studio intensive with Design Corps (Figure 1), I was introduced to the ideas of asset-based community development, generational poverty, and environmental activism—seen through the lens of architecture. As a thesis student, I cofounded a student chapter of Architecture for Humanity and helped my friends construct a modular affordable housing prototype (Figure 2). These immersive experiences shaped my approach to my newly chosen profession and set me on a lifelong path.

Figure 1: (L) Asheville Bus Shelter, 2006 (Design Corps)

Figure 2: (R) Modular Habitat House, Virginia Tech, 2009 (Jodi Dubyoski)

2. COMMUNITY DESIGN, PARTICIPATORY PLANNING, AND SOCIALLY ENGAGED PEDAGOGY

For decades before I entered architecture school in the early 2000s, architectural education had been preparing students to engage with real-world issues through hands-on learning. The earliest seeds of modern education, sown in the pedagogy of the Bauhaus, carried with them the idea that architecture can and should shape society. Hannes Meyer, who led the Bauhaus from 1928 to 1930, posited that the ultimate aim of Bauhaus work was the "harmonious arrangement of our society," an idea that was a reflection of the modernist movement as a whole (Saval 2019).

In the hands of the modernists, however, architecture remained a tool of power and privilege, as it had been for centuries. It was through the civil rights movement of the 1960s that the social imperative in architecture gained new relevance and momentum. Though community design centers had already begun to organize in the early 1960s, the origin of the community design movement is commonly traced to a single keynote speech given by Whitney M. Young in 1968. While the mythology of this moment is overinflated in community

design lore, it was effectively a call to racial justice in the built environment that catalyzed the subsequent community design movement.

In the following decades, through widespread adoption of participatory design methods, architects and planners challenged the existing paradigms of who had power and a voice in shaping the built environment. Henry Sanoff traces this growth in his essay "Multiple Views of Participatory Design," while demonstrating that the idea of participation in design and planning remained fundamentally aimed at a redistribution of power in city making (Sanoff 2011). At its core is the idea of the "right to the city," first proposed by Henri Lefebvre, and expanded on by thinkers like David Harvey, who says:

> The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. (Harvey 2008)

Giancarlo De Carlo, an architect and educator of the era and another champion of participatory design, says simply, "Architecture is too important to be left to architects" (De Carlo 2007, 13).

Early examples of community design principles in academia include the Black Workshop at Yale, founded by Black students in 1968 to engage in community-driven urban design. Around the same time, we begin to see the emergence of design-build studios, a hands-on, immersive learning experience that often centered issues of poverty or homelessness. One of the first modern design-build studios was also at Yale, but others soon followed, the most well known of which is the Rural Studio, founded by Sam Mockbee and Daniel K. (D.K.) Ruth in rural Alabama in 1993. Today, more than 70 percent of US architecture schools have in-house design-build programs (Gjertson 2014). Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the concurrent rise of the community design movement, participatory planning, and design-build education laid the groundwork for what we now call social impact design.

By the time my peers and I entered college at the dawn of the twenty-first century, social responsibility and personal impact were deeply embedded in the culture of architectural education. Thus, when Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005, the stage was set for the academy and practice to converge in a very public way. Brad Pitt's Make It Right Foundation and the global humanitarian agency Architecture for Humanity made headlines for their relief efforts, and this sudden visibility propelled community-engaged design into the public consciousness. For students of architecture at the time, the possibility of social impact through a career in architecture was being modeled for us before our eyes (Walker 2016).

To what are we to attribute the endurance of this trend in architectural education? Some of its continued relevance may be, as Margaret Crawford (1991) suggests, rooted in an identity crisis birthed in the professionalization of the discipline, whereby social responsibility as a professional ethic became a means of distinguishing ourselves from the other building trades. Contextually, social entrepreneurship on the whole has been on the rise since the latter half of the twentieth century. In their 2013 Latrobe Prize study, "Wisdom from the Field: Public Interest Architecture in Practice," Roberta M. Feldman and her coauthors report that 30 percent of the respondents they surveyed "gave 'putting creative abilities to practical use,' and 'improving quality of life in communities' as their first and second reasons [for entering the profession]" (Feldman et al. 2013, 3). Surveying the wide variety of educational experiences available, three common characteristics emerge to explain the gravitational pull of incorporating social impact in design education: opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning; the feeling of personal agency or individual impact; and the chance to address systemic and structural inequalities through the design of the built environment—or "make the world a better place."

In 2009, I was a newly minted architecture graduate with an impact design education facing the worst job market we'd seen in decades. So, I took the first sensible opportunity that came along and signed up to ride my bike across the country to raise money for affordable housing. In my team of twenty-five young adults, three of us unemployed architecture school grads, we stopped along the way to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together. Following the trip, I signed on to work with one of our workforce housing partners for a natural building internship in southern Utah. Both of these practical learning experiences gave me a chance to contribute meaningfully as an individual and allowed me to work as part of a team addressing the structural inequalities of the housing industry.

Figure 3: (L) Bike & Build, 2009 (Jodi Dubyoski)

Figure 4: (R) Community Rebuilds, 2010 (Community Rebuilds)

After a couple of part-time engagements, the economy began to steady, and I landed my first full-time office job nearly two years after graduation. Finally on the path to licensure, I spent the next few years working in small and mid-sized firms, experiencing a range of project scales and team sizes and remaining engaged in community design as I could, as a volunteer.

3. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE: BUSINESS AS USUAL IN AN ERA OF SOCIAL IMPACT DESIGN

Being confronted with a profession that conducts business as usual while academia is grooming a generation of socially responsible architects is jarring for new graduates. Stakeholder participation is an essential process in social impact design, and yet obstacles to incorporating participation into practice are plentiful and are generally tied to issues of time and value. A common objection to participatory processes is that transparent processes generate conflict and cause unnecessary and expensive delays. Put another way, people themselves are the problem. As long as professional services are billed hourly, participation is viewed as extra, not integral, and must generally be subsidized by foundations or government entities (Davidoff 1965)—a process that contributes to even more delays and restrictions.

   A secondary, related contributor is that the value a design professional brings to the process is not always clear. Educating the public on the value of architecture was one of the action steps named by Feldman and her coauthors for sustaining and expanding public interest practices (Feldman et al. 2013, 7–8). The AIA has attempted to address the public perception issue over the years, recently through the #ILookUp campaign in 2014, an arguably out-of-touch public relations effort that failed to address root causes, retaining a focus on buildings as products rather than on the ability of architects to partner in shaping processes and outcomes.

3.1 The Problem of Pro Bono

In the last decade or so, pro bono studio programs have cropped up at the country's biggest firms, evidence that the desire to incorporate community-centered work is part of a larger trend. CannonDesign's Open Hand Studio (2009), Citizen HKS (2014), and the Social Purpose Program at Perkins & Will are just a few notable examples. The creation of these programs and others like them was spurred by Public Architecture's One Percent program (now known as 1+), founded in 2003 (McKnight 2016). According to the One Percent website, member firms provide nearly $30 million in services each year.

Number of employees	Share of firms	Share of staff	Share of billings
1 to 9	75.8%	19.4%	13.7%
10 to 49	18.0%	29.8%	30.3%
50 or more	6.3%	50.8%	56.0%

Figure 5: Share of 2018 billings by firm size (American Institute of Architects)

The idea of giving away professional services to those who can't afford them is great in theory, but as long as profit and value are tied to the number of hours worked, pro bono doesn't work. Consider $30 million annually (the value of pro bono services donated via the 1% program) in relation to small-firm operating budgets. Seventy-five percent of architecture firms consist of nine or fewer employees. With 19% of architectural staff nationwide, these small firms command less than 14% of total annual billings (Figure 5). Large firms, on the other hand, take in 56% of billings compared to their 51% of staff. These numbers are based on 2017, when national billings totaled $484 billion dollars (AIA 2018).

While it is an imperfect analysis, since large firms carry more overhead per person, if we look at the difference between the share of total billings in relation to the share of total staff, then large firms bring in a 5 percent higher share, or $24.2 billion annually. The aggregated pro bono amount of $30 million is less than 1 percent of that "surplus"— effectively a negligible amount. Assuming that a small firm needs to generate $100,000 in revenue per employee per year (Figure 6), and that by that reasoning $500,000 can support a five-person office, then $30 million could reasonably support sixty five-person offices (Ramos 2017).

figure 1.4 | EVEN WITH BENEFITS TO SCALE IN THE PROFESSION, MOST ARCHITECTURE FIRMS REMAIN SMALL

Share of total firms, staff, and gross billings in the profession by firm size, 2012

Firm size (number of employees)	Share of firms	Share of staff	Share of billings	Net revenue per employee
1 employee	26%	3%	2%	$70,000
2–4 employees	37%	12%	8%	$74,000
5–9 employees	18%	13%	11%	$95,000
10–19 employees	10%	15%	14%	$113,000
20–49 employees	6%	20%	22%	$132,000
50–99 employees	2%	15%	16%	$136,000
100+ employees	1%	22%	27%	$138,000
All firm average				$86,000

Figure 6: 2012 net revenue by firm size (American Institute of Architects)

When hours spent on pro bono are hours taken from paying work, only firms large enough to absorb the lost revenue can afford to spend meaningful hours on unpaid projects. For the rest of us, in the absence of this ability to absorb additional overhead, pro bono work often means accelerated burnout or a lower quality deliverable. In addition, offering services for free does nothing to properly anchor the value of design services in the eyes of the public.

Today's rising practitioners are unsatisfied with outdated business models that do not address contemporary concerns about social impact, and we seek more sustainable methods of integrating the participatory strategies we employed in academia into twenty-first-century practice.

4. FORM COALITION: PUTTING PARTICIPATION INTO PRACTICE

In 2018, the Association for Community Design reaffirmed racial justice as the top priority for its network of community design practitioners in the United States (Association for Community Design 2018)—a call for architects to facilitate the redistribution of power in the creation of space, just as in the early days of community design. As we enter the second half of 2020, there is a renewed call for racial justice nationwide, and a new urgency to reckon with the legacy of racist policies on public space. As community design practitioners, we redistribute power to our clients through participatory processes, by making services accessible through transparent pricing, and through knowledge sharing.

As a for-profit community design practice, we try to approach participation at FORM Coalition in a couple of different ways. The first is: Who participates in the design of space? Within this framework, participation is about building processes that get stakeholders to the table and provide multiple opportunities for co-creation along the way. In practice, this means that thoughtful and inclusive community engagement is an indispensable part of our design process—not an add-on. (I'll admit that this is often aspirational.)

The other question we ask is: Who has access to space once it's constructed? In our position as service providers, this is much more difficult to control or influence, but reflecting on two recent trends in the profession can help reframe the question. The first is the architects-as-developer model, and while this is not something we've adopted at FORM Coalition, we do intentionally network with small, community-minded developers so we can pursue clients who are more likely to align with our values. The other trend we've been benefiting from is the uptick in marketing coaching for small-firm architects and service providers designed to help untether fees from time. As we refine our implementation of value-based pricing, we can continue to steer the conversation away from the cost of time and toward shared values and results.

In addition to building participation into our process, we continue to develop service packages with increasing clarity and responsiveness to the needs we uncover in our target clients. In designing FORM Coalition's service offerings, I've been inspired by examples like Sarah Hobday-North and YARD & Company. Hobday-North is an Australian architect whose company, Value Architects Group, offers "Super smart architectural services at fixed prices. No surprises." In doing so, she's able to serve nonprofits, small developers, and what she calls "community champions with a vision." YARD & Company, a planning and development services firm based in Cincinnati, Ohio, has designed a project delivery system for a participatory predesign process; by digging deep into the value a thorough participatory process can provide and communicating this clearly in their messaging through service packages, they offer a concise invitation to client collaborators.

The Latrobe study names "expanding disciplinary and professional boundaries" as a strategy that has proven effective for impact-oriented firms. In our strongest projects, we work closely with community engagement specialists and facilitators. This has the dual benefit of strengthening our capacity as a team, while also lending credibility to our effort through the trust they have established as a community partner—it's not intuitive to hire an architect to lead community engagement. Similarly, I've enjoyed successful partnerships with economic development professionals and look forward to an expanding network of interdisciplinary collaborators as we continue to grow. To illustrate our approach, what follows are descriptions of three projects from our first year in operation.

4.1 Fulton—Participatory "Placemaking"

Figure 7: (L) Historic Fulton (The Valentine Museum)

Figure 8: (R) Commercial corridor, Fulton, Richmond, Virginia (FORM Coalition)

Greater Fulton is a collection of neighborhoods in Richmond's East End. It's a historically Black, working-class area that's seeing a quiet resurgence after decades of disinvestment and crime. The original Historic Fulton was a thriving community of homes, businesses, and churches that was demolished as part of an urban renewal project in the 1970s—almost no trace of the original structures remains (Figure 7). More than eight hundred homes, businesses, and churches were destroyed, and the families who lived in them, displaced. The area's remaining commercial corridor is a monument to autocentric urban planning (Figure 8). It's grossly underutilized, both in terms of building stock and in general land use and density (Figure 9).
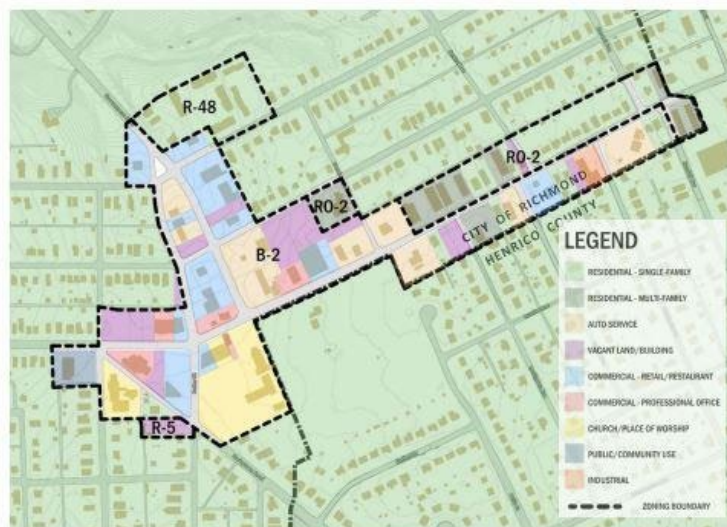

Figure 9: Existing land use and zoning (2019), Fulton, Richmond, Virginia

(FORM Coalition)

FORM Coalition was hired by Innovate Fulton, a local economic development nonprofit, to build on a community engagement and planning effort that had been conducted by the local community center (Neighborhood Resource Center of Greater Fulton) in partnership with Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) in 2011. We worked with a self-selected group of neighborhood residents to solidify a set of design priorities, then illustrated them and presented them to the community for feedback. As a result of our work together, Innovate Fulton now has a complete set of concepts to display in their office (and tote to community meetings), demonstrating plans to improve Transit and Transportation, Green Infrastructure, Housing, and Culture and Community (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Community engagement, Fulton, Richmond, Virginia (Jaclyn Brown)

Unlike the traditional means of engaging an architect once the land or space is secured, providing a venue for proactive conversation about development *before* developers are involved was extremely rewarding. In reality, it necessitated some flexibility and creativity regarding compensation, including assisting the client in a grant application so they could pay our fee (we got the grant). Additionally, we gathered valuable data about the time and effort involved, which will help with appropriate fee setting in future projects.

4.2 Northside—Capacity Building

Over the last year, our work on Richmond's Northside has focused on capacity building; we have been working closely with a group of business owners to develop networks, skills, and source funding as they anticipate the rezoning and redevelopment of the local commercial district.

The intersection of Chamberlayne Ave. and Brookland Park Boulevard (newly christened the ChamberBrook Business and Arts District) forms a crossroads between a collection of racially and socioeconomically separated neighborhoods (Figure 11). Historically, the corridor was the highway entering Richmond and home to a number of tourist homes (Holly 2010). The new vision for ChamberBrook imagines it as a gateway to the city and a thriving mixed-use district (Figure 12).
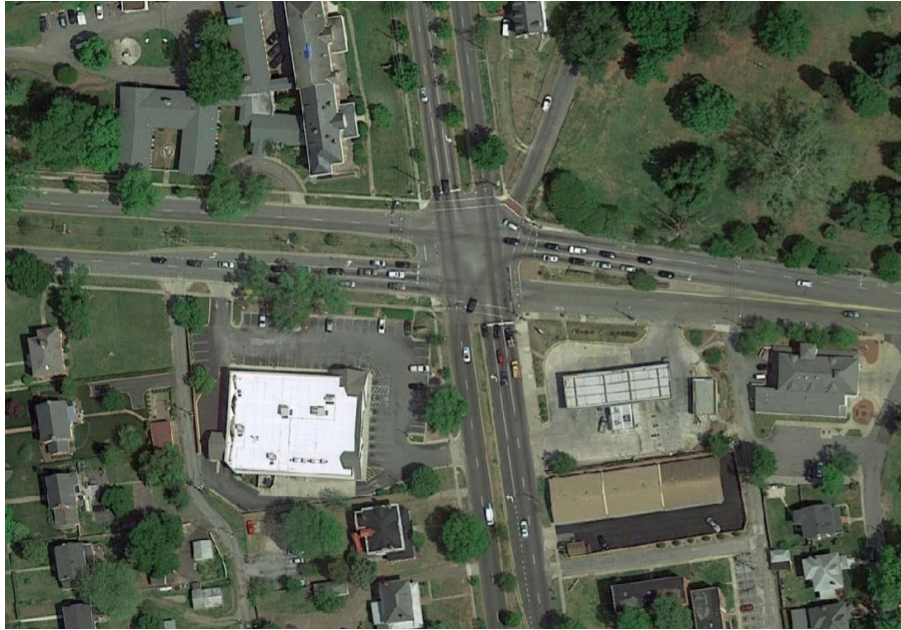

Figure 11: Aerial view of Brookland Park Blvd. (E–W) and Chamberlayne Ave. (N–S)

(Google Earth)

Over the past year, our team has completed conceptual programming and design for vacant lots and buildings, convened stakeholders around a shared vision, and advocated on behalf of our coalition as the city of Richmond made updates to their comprehensive plan. We've built momentum through small, high-impact projects like participating in Park[ing] Day (Figure 13), an international event where people construct pop-up parks in parking spaces. Much of our effort is focused on positioning landowners and business owners to steer inevitable redevelopment efforts in a community-led manner, through the formation of a business owners' association presenting a unified voice to the city and thinking about what the organizations might look like in the future.

Figure 12: Rendering of Brookland Park Blvd. and Chamberlayne Ave. (HKS Richmond)

This capacity-building process is ongoing, and unlike a traditional design process with identifiable milestones, it is slow to see wins—but this work is essential to building a proactive (rather than a reactionary) future for the area. Our team consists of architects, community engagement and lobbying consultants, and marketing and media pros. In this work, our role at FORM Coalition is to help *design the process* of moving forward. To date, there has not been a lot in the way of conventional "design" or architecture; the emphasis is on a multipronged approach that champions economic justice. The group is committed to steering thoughtful redevelopment that allows business owners and residents to remain in place as property values inevitably rise. In the absence of clear milestones, we periodically pause to look back and take stock of our victories.

Figure 13: Park[ing] Day 2019, Brookland Park Blvd. (FORM Coalition)

4.3 City Yard—Multidisciplinary Teaming

In the case of City Yard in Charlottesville's Starr Hill neighborhood, FORM Coalition filled the role of urban designer in a multidisciplinary consultant team of planners and facilitators. Together, we delivered a Small Area Plan for adoption into the city's Comprehensive Plan (Figures 14–16). As a small practice, we find that this is an effective way to work, particularly in communities that we are neither a member of nor have an existing relationship with (and lack the time in which to build one).

Figure 14: (L) City Yard, Charlottesville, Virginia (Google Maps)

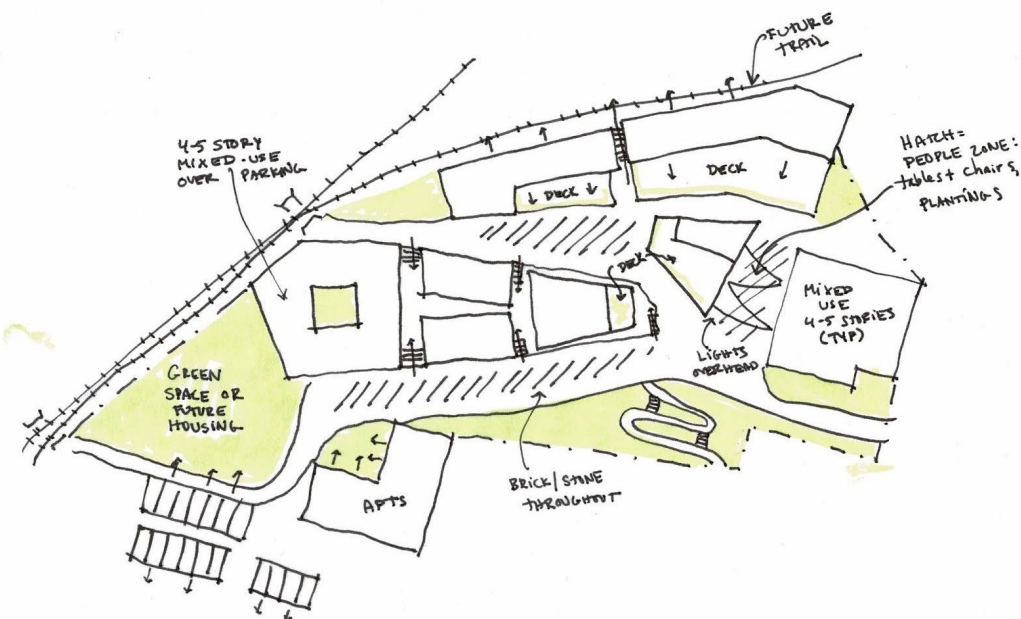Figure 15: (R) Conceptual Sketch (FORM Coalition)

Figure 16: City Yard—Schematic Plan (FORM Coalition)

The scope itself was very much in line with our values related to racial justice and our experience of working at the neighborhood mixed-use scale. Following the Unite the Right

Rally in 2017, the city of Charlottesville, along with a nonprofit housing developer, hired our partner—a local strategic planning and facilitation consultant—to conduct an eighteen-month-long community engagement and planning process for a historically Black neighborhood in Charlottesville's downtown core. Floricane, the lead consultant, hired local community members during the discovery phase to conduct interviews and surveys to uncover community needs and desires. FORM Coalition was hired as a subcontractor to help deliver the final plan and accompanying report.

Because of our background in working at this scale and with communities of change, we were able to get on board and execute quickly. Combining expertise with adjacent professionals is a highly effective way for small, community-minded firms to take on projects with wider-reaching impact than they may be able to achieve alone. Furthermore, it acknowledges that architecture alone cannot solve complex societal problems, but rather that solutions are achieved through a multidisciplinary approach that addresses the economic, social, infrastructure, and public health aspects of neighborhood change—*and* consults the respective experts.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

As far as incorporating participatory planning into our process in a sustainable way, much remains aspirational from a business standpoint. Experimenting with fixed-fee contracts and clear scoping is certainly a learning curve for new business owners. In our first year in business, nearly half of our revenue came from contracted drafting work for other architecture firms, while two-thirds of our *time* was spent on work for our ideal clients (Figure 17).
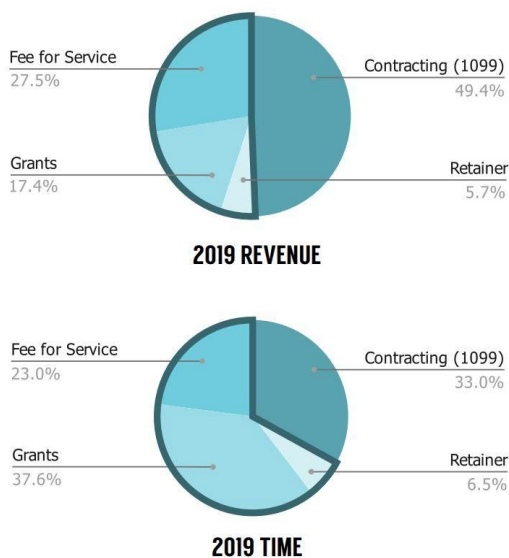

Figure 17: 2019 FORM Coalition revenue vs. time (FORM Coalition)

One of the findings of the Latrobe report was that impact design practices that thrive find creative ways to overcome funding challenges, such as expanding the types of services offered. In the near term, our focus is on innovating our way to a consistent income stream. As we move ahead, we continue to look for ways to incorporate the values acquired in the course of an impact design education: a love of hands-on learning, the importance of celebrating the agency and impact of each individual involved in our projects, and keeping our vision focused on solving the big, complex challenges of our time.

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