Advocacy? Three Modes of Operation for the Activist Architect

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The article proposes three ways of operating that are based on a re-reading of advocacy planning: *'Choose a cause'*, *'Create a constituency'*, and *'Add an agenda'*. Firstly, in *'Choose a cause'*, the article revisits Davidoff's notion of the advocacy planner, but explores how the tools and representational techniques have changed the process and its products. Secondly, in *'Create a constituency'*, it examines a new model of project initiation that occurs without a client, which differs significantly from Davidoff's conception of how the advocate works. Thirdly, in *'Add an agenda'*, it discusses techniques of building additional agendas into a project that are external to (and sometimes even in conflict with) the client's goals.

By identifying these ways of operating as an advocate, the article seeks to define a proactive alternative to traditional professional practice.

1   In his landmark 1965 essay 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning', Paul Davidoff argued that planners should be advocates for the underprivileged and poor, advancing their interests much in the same way that a lawyer represents a client. Davidoff's work, which responded to the urban crises in American cities in the 1960s, sparked new forms of activism in architecture and planning that influenced a generation of practitioners through the 1970s.

2   For descriptions of a range of activist practitioners, see Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout, 'Facts on the Ground: Urbanism from Mid-Road to Ditch', *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 2006/Winter 2007), Clare Cumberlidge and Lucy Musgrave, *Design and Landscape for People: New Approaches to Renewal* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2007), and Mario Ballesteros, ed., *Verb: Crisis* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008).

3   Interboro is Tobias Armborst, Daniel D'Oca, and Georgeen Theodore.

4   The site, formerly owned and controlled by the United States Army, was sold by the federal government to Bayonne's Local Redevelopment Agency (the BLRA) with the specification that a portion of the site be dedicated to maritime uses. However, the BLRA wants to redevelop the site as a luxury waterfront community, and inclusion of certain maritime uses—such as a container port—makes the redevelopment process more difficult. The BLRA has been working behind the scenes to invalidate the original terms of the agreement in order to eliminate specific maritime uses. However, the ILA considers the inclusion of a container port essential to its livelihood and has continually (although at times ineffectually) challenged the BLRA's plans.

In his landmark 1965 essay 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning', Paul Davidoff argued that planners should be advocates for the underprivileged and poor, advancing their interests much in the same way that a lawyer represents a client.[1] Davidoff's work, which responded to the urban crises in American cities in the 1960s, sparked new forms of activism in architecture and planning that influenced a generation of practitioners through the 1970s. Rejecting the idea of planning as a rational science that operates from a 'neutral' professional position, the proponents of advocacy planning pointed out that planning is by its very nature a political endeavor. There are always winners and losers in every plan and development proposal, and the planner (and designer) has to pick sides.

The idea of rational planning, the proponents of advocacy planning argued, was ultimately nothing more than a smoke screen for planning as a tool in the hands of the powerful. What if, advocacy planning asked, instead of 'automatically' working for the powerful, planners would consciously pick sides, and use their professional position and expertise to work for less powerful constituencies in the city? This question, addressed by advocacy planners of the 60s and 70s, obviously raises a number of other questions that advocacy planning ultimately failed to answer: What is the planner's agency and professional position? Does she work as a free agent or as a bureaucrat with a hidden agenda? Who are her clients? Individuals? A community? And what is a community after all?

After the American planning profession's near extinction in the 1980s, there is today a renewed interest in planning as a means to bring about political and societal change. Recently a small number of designers worldwide have customized ideas of advocacy planning in very specific, often small-scale and sometimes surprising looking projects. Often operating from a position of professional independence, blurring or entirely dismissing the boundaries between planning, architecture and art, these practices take cues from earlier models of advocacy in planning, yet strive to find answers to these open questions in the particularities of specific projects.[2]

As principals in the planning and research office Interboro, I and my partners have revisited aspects of advocacy planning over the last couple of years to investigate how they might play a larger role in practice.[3] Using a number of our projects as examples, I would like to address some of these questions regarding the architect and planner's role as an advocate.

'Choose a Cause'

Bayonne Community Outreach Services

In 2007, Interboro was approached by the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) to help advocate for the retention of container port uses on a highly contested waterfront site in Bayonne, New Jersey. A local planning agency was in the process of redeveloping a former military ocean terminal, and the ILA believed that port uses were illegally excluded in the masterplan.[4] Rather than develop a 'counter' plan, Interboro suggested that the ILA should focus their efforts on informing and educating the public of the illegality and costs of excluding container uses in the redevelopment. Taking form as a mail-able broadsheet, the project 'Bayonne Community Outreach Services' fights for the Longshoremen's cause.

In this project, my partners and I have taken on a role that most closely aligns with Davidoff's definition of the advocacy planner, in that we worked for a clearly defined client whose cause we deemed worth fighting for.
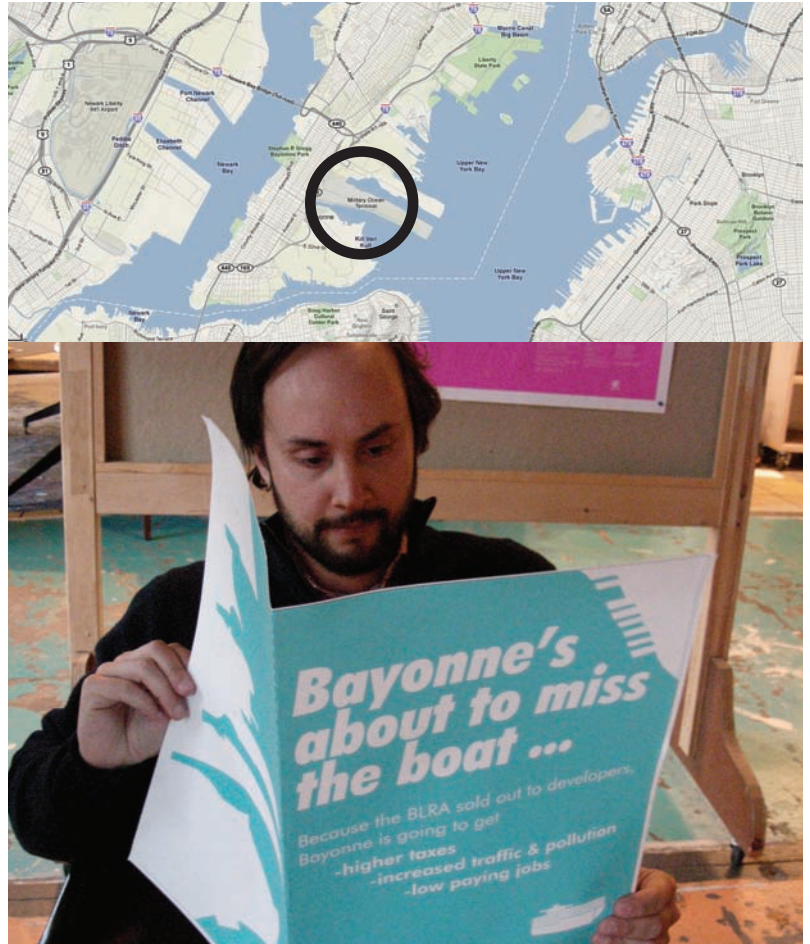
Fig. 1. (Top) The site on the peninsula of Bayonne, New Jersey, in the context of New York Harbour

Fig. 2. (Above) The broadsheet

But while Davidoff describes the advocacy planner's role as preparing a plan that articulates the interests of a poor or powerless group, we instead focused our efforts on visualizing the impact of the redevelopment efforts. We brought these illustrations together in one document, a broadsheet, to be distributed to the community's electorate—not the city's planning agency. So, in terms of both product (we developed a publication rather than a plan) and a process (we are bypassing the city's planning agency), we have adapted and changed what the advocacy planner traditionally does.

We chose to develop the project in this way because the decision of whether to retain the container port uses would ultimately be decided by a local referendum. We focused our efforts on addressing Bayonne voters and proposed making a broadsheet, an easy to read, multi-paged flyer that can be distributed by hand or mailed.

Our challenge was to help resident voters understand the economic and spatial implications of two competing development scenarios: namely, a new residential waterfront community vs. maritime port functions. On the one hand, we needed to untangle the complex legal wrangling of the project and its site, and on the other, we had to relativize the conflict in terms of the issues that mattered most to residents. The broadsheet could
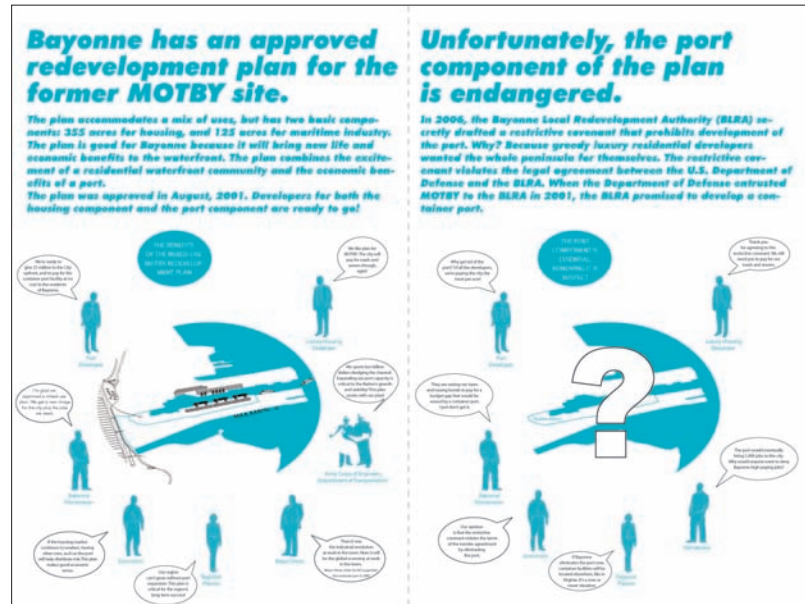
Fig. 3. With these illustrations, we sought to 'ghostwrite' the constituents' responses to future development. We focused on the issues that mattered most to the electorate: taxes, jobs, and traffic.
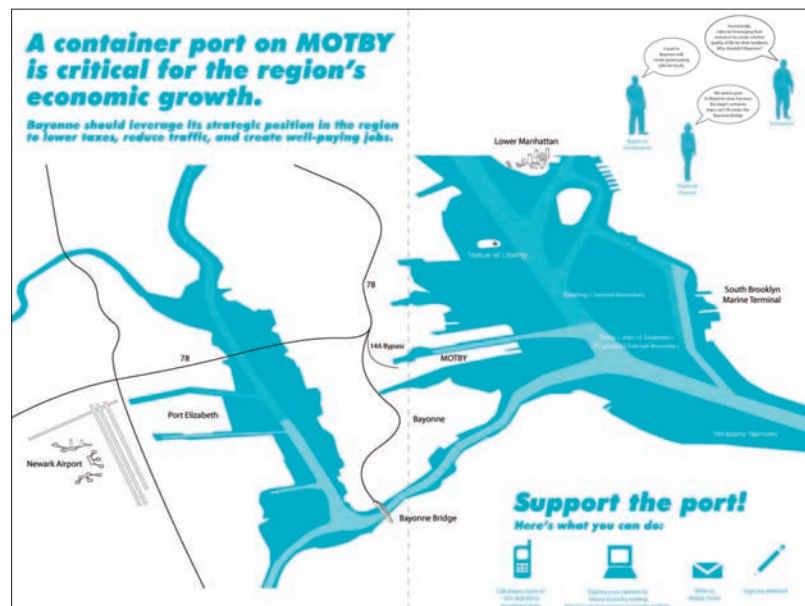

Fig. 4. Although residents focus more on the local impacts of the development, we also highlighted the regional implications of the project.

be used in two ways: one, as a 'script' of talking points for ILA members to use as a guide in their door-to-door canvassing of Bayonne neighborhoods; two, as a mailer to be sent out to Bayonne households.

The broadsheet turned out to be an effective way of engaging a local public that otherwise would not have learned about and discussed this planning issue. While the use of information graphics and design certainly goes beyond typical planning work, this particular approach presupposes the presence of a clearly defined and well-organised 'client' or community. In the case of this project, the 'client' was the ILA, who came to the project with a budget, a distribution network, and an agenda.

Fig. 6. We developed a set of cards that visualised each vision. Above, the 'New Housing' card.

Fig. 7. Most visions have clients. For example, housing's clients are new homeowners.

'Create a Constituency'

Deploy the 'De-Voider'; Improve Your Lot!

In other Interboro projects, our planning work has gone beyond advocating for existing, organised, and well-deserving 'clients.' In 'Deploy the 'De-Voider'' and Improve Your Lot!', advocating includes the assembling and organizing a community *that does not yet exist.* Rather than waiting for a client to approach us, we have created a constituency by rendering visible a (yet to be identified) public's practices, naming the community, and helping it organize. Advocacy shouldn't always be about helping an existing constituency obtain its stated goals, but about producing or assembling a public out of the infinity of practices that exist in the city.

'Deploy the De-Voider!' was Interboro's entry to the Van Alen Institute's *Urban Voids: Grounds for Change Competition.* The project was awarded an honorable mention. Our response to the competition, which asked entrants to come up with new visions for vacant land in Philadelphia, was to stress that there are already a lot of visions for vacant land in Philadelphia. Instead of envisioning a vision, we decided to use the competition as an opportunity to advocate for an existing vision that no one would have any economic incentive to take on. As advocates, we thought we could tease out and make visible a vision that already exists, but that has fewer resources (i.e., money, advocates, institutional support) or less legitimacy than some of the other visions. Our point wasn't that the other visions are bad; it's that they don't really need our help.

Driving and walking around the city, we saw evidence of many of these existing visions, ranging from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's vision of transforming empty lots into neighborhood gardens, to Philadelphia Green's vision of cleaning and 'greening' empty lots to improve a neighborhood's image, to the Mural Arts Program's vision of local artists painting the party walls adjacent to vacant lots. We began by taking an inventory of these existing visions; this inventory took shape as a set of cards that visualized each vision. Each card identified the vision, its

Fig. 5. Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program commissions local artists to paint the party walls fronting vacant lots.

advocate and clients, and whether the vision was strategic or tactical. For example, affordable housing is one of the strategic visions we identified. As a vision, affordable housing receives institutional support from a number of different advocates (from the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, the City of Philadelphia, and the National Homebuilders), all of whom have budgets, staffs, and supporters. This vision also has a clear set of clients: new homeowners.

We also identified what we called 'tactical' visions: practices that have no advocates, no institutional support, and no budgets, such as garbage dumping. Other 'tactical' visions included fantasy gardens, home extensions, private parking, and micro-enterprises. We considered these visions to be tactical because each was realized by a self-interested individual, working from the bottom-up, without any consideration of a larger, overall plan. Building on Michel de Certeau's conception of strategies and tactics, here 'tactical' visions represent the 'art of the weak.'[5]

As a means to evaluate these competing visions—both strategic and tactical—we mapped them according to 'desirability'[6] and capital. We created a graph with capital on the x-axis and desirability on the y-axis. For example, the aforementioned garbage dumping was located in the very cheap and very undesirable quadrant, whereas new housing was located in the expensive and desirable quadrant. This diagram was useful for us as planners and architects to define where we want to operate. In the case of this project, we chose to focus on the quadrant defined by high desirability and low capital, which is the only quadrant without advocates, i.e: the only quadrant without institutional support, i.e: the only quadrant that needs and deserves help. One way we thought we could help was to develop a product line we call 'De-Voider', a cheap kit of parts that helps individuals appropriate empty lots. The practices we identified in the quadrant defined by high desirability and low capital—such as building a house extension or parking a car—could be made easier with small, relatively inexpensive, 'off-the-shelf' items such as the 'instant curb cut,' which can be used to a convert a vacant lot into a driveway, and the 'carport unit' which transforms an empty property into a securable garage, and so on.

[5] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.37.

[6] We evaluated 'desirability' from our own perspective, which is, of course, subjective.

Fig. 8. Some visions have no advocates, like the vision of transforming vacant lots into fantasy gardens.
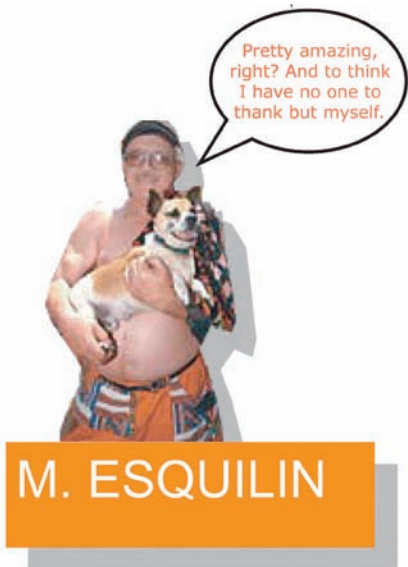

Fig. 9. Marcelino Esquilin, using found objects such as carousel hourses, created a fantasy garden out of his vacant lot.
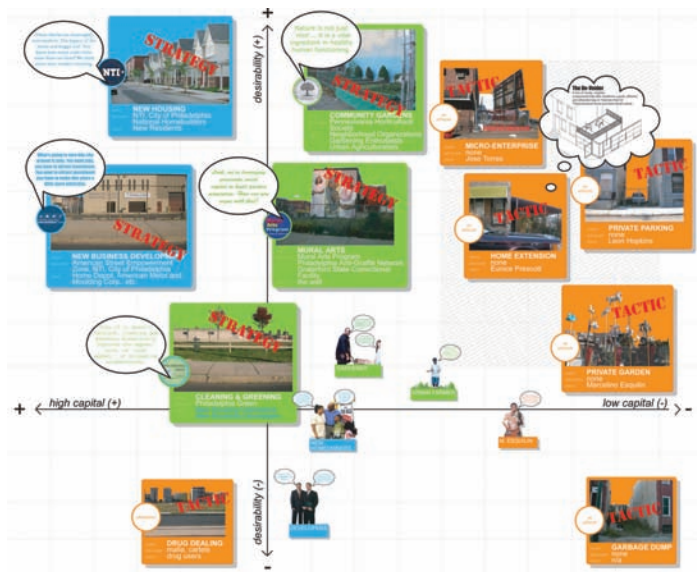

Fig. 10. We mapped a variety of visions according to capital and desirability. We also identified which visions are strategic and which are tactical.

Fig. 10. We proposed the 'De-Voider' product line: cheap, off-the-shelf items to be sold at the local hardware store or Home Depot.

Another project in which we rendered a constituency is called 'Improve Your Lot!', which began as a winning entry to the *Shrinking Cities—Reimagining Urbanism*[7] competition. One of the most visible consequences of urban 'shrinkage' is vacant and abandoned land, and in 'Improve Your Lot!' we take a close look at this phenomenon in the city of Detroit, Michigan. Over the years, there have been many spectacular proposals of how to repurpose Detroit's vacant land (rope it off and return it to nature, create a museum of ruins, and so on); in contrast, 'Improve Your Lot!' focuses on a mostly overlooked and unspectacular phenomenon of Detroit's vacant land crisis: that most of the vacant land actually consists of small, single-family lots next to occupied homes, and that recently, many of these vacant lots have been bought up by the owners of adjacent houses.

We call this phenomenon *blotting*, and the expanded parcel a *blot*. Blotting suggests that despite very low property values and other unfavorable conditions, there are nonetheless ways in which individual Detroit residents 'make do' and actually take advantage of shrinkage by expanding and improving their property. While these improvements occur incrementally and from the bottom-up, the cumulative effect of this practice is a large-scale, unplanned 're-platting' of the city. We began this project by driving around and looking for clues of these

[7] Shrinking Cities is a project (2002-2008) of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, under the direction of Philipp Oswalt (Berlin) in co-operation with the Leipzig Gallery of Contemporary Art, the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and the magazine Archplus.

For more information about the competition, see http://www.shrinkingcities.com/wettbewerb.0.html?&L=1 [accessed 2009].
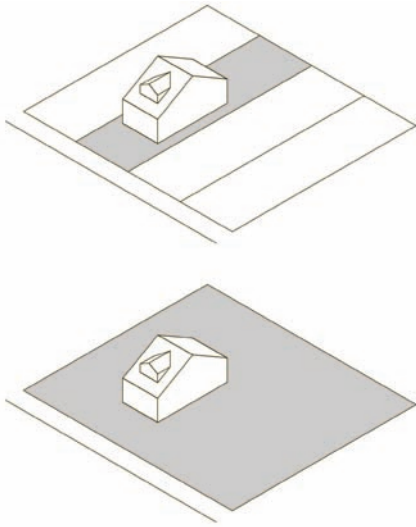
Fig. 11. The first steps of 'creating a constituency' are to name a practice (in this case 'blotting'), and second, make that practice visible.

Fig. 12. (Below) Driving around the City of Detroit, we found evidence of all sorts of blots. Homeowners have expanded their lots to create house extensions, garages, driveways, expanded yards (including spaces for trampolines, satelite dishes and formal gardens).

practices. Some blots were visible because of physical improvements; for example, we found evidence of garage blots, trampoline blots, satellite dish blots, above ground pool blots, driveway blots, and carport blots. Other blots were not so easily identifiable; by searching through the city's cadastral maps, we found evidence that many homeowners had purchased the vacant lots next to their homes. However, they had not yet made any improvements on their expanded property.

Like in the 'De-Voider' project, we visualized these practices through a combination of photography, mapping, and diagramming. We present each case study in a narrative format that explains—through drawings and short texts—how the blot was formed. Furthermore, we visualized the cumulative effects of blotting. By tracing and projecting these property expansions at the scale of a block and beyond, we show that these self-interested actions have a transformative potential.

By rendering these stories visible, we advocate not only for a particular practice (blotting) but for a particular public—the public of blotters that have never been identified as such. We have used these visualizations to introduce the blotting phenomenon to institutions and organisations that might have an interest in strengthening these practices—such as land bank supporters, community development corporations, and city planning officials. We are also working to make it easier for more people to create blots through the development of a 'blotblog', where the newly formed public of blotters can swap expertise, stories, and advice about improving Detroit's vacant lots.

Fig. 13. The expansions of the Anderanin family's property reflect the incremental way in which many blots are formed. In 1932, Jean Anderanin, the family matriarch, purchased one home on one 30x100 foot lot. At this time, every lot had a home. By 1991, the Anderanin property was surrounded by vacant, City owned lots. In 1992, Jean bought the two adjacent parcels. In 1999, her son Michael Anderanin, Jr. purchased two more. Then in 2002, Michael Jr. bought one more lot. By 2004, the Anderanin property had been reconfigured as a six parcel blot. Enclosed by a fence, and improved with a gazebo, koi pond, and a small poultry coop, what began as one 30x100 foot lot is now a 180x100 foot garden blot.
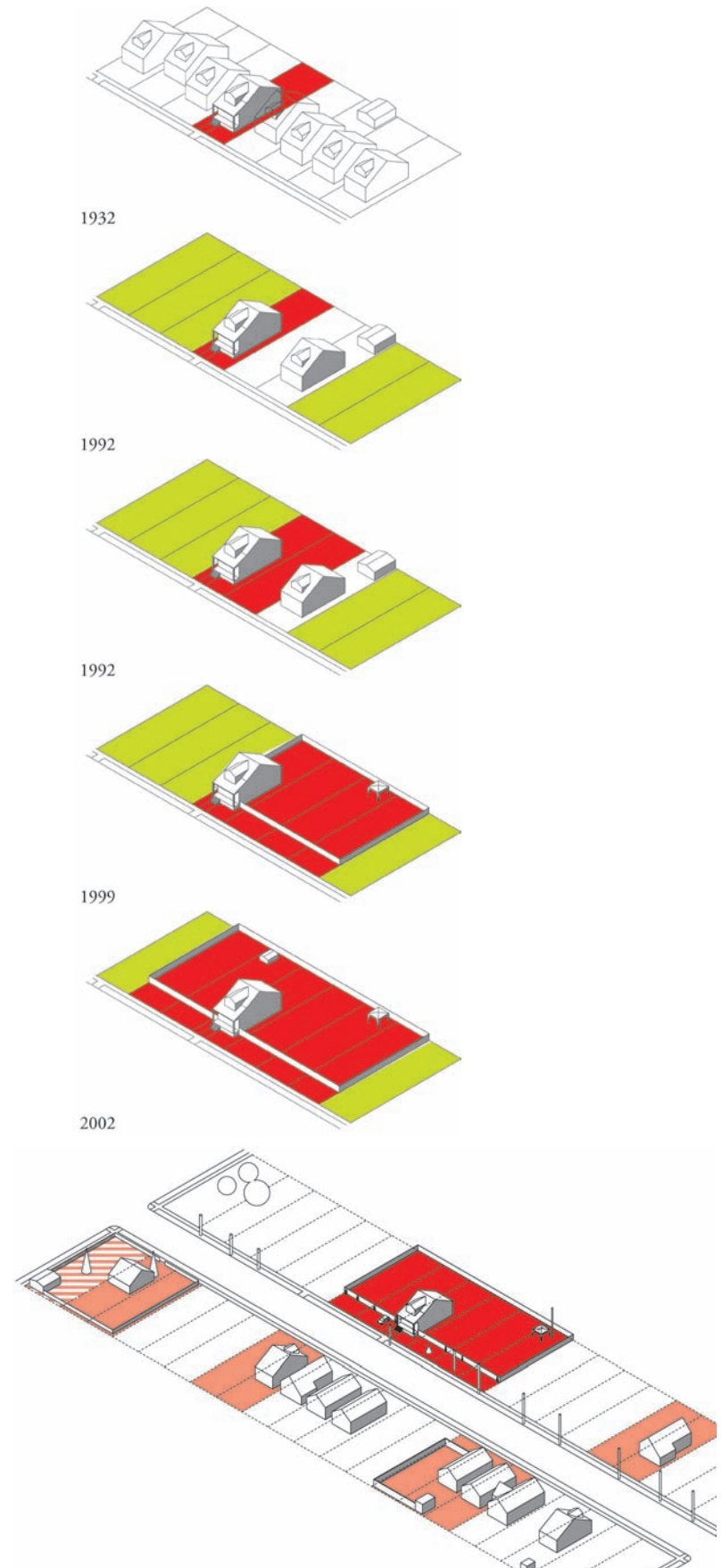
1932

1992

1992

1999

2002

Fig. 14. The Anderanin family blot, shown in red. There are four additional blots on this block, shown in pink.

Add an Agenda

Lent Space

A third way to reconsider and expand the role of advocacy in the design process is to incorporate social, political, or environmental agendas into traditional, service-based projects. These agendas are not client generated or driven. In this way, the architect serves doubly: on the one hand as a professional service provider and on the other as an activist advocating for a particular cause or outcome. While this may seem contrary to traditional notions of advocacy, in that the primary client may be powerful and not in need of an advocate, architects could have the greatest impact in this role, since this kind of thinking could be applied to a much larger number of projects.

Fig. 16. The project is located on a prominent site in Soho, New York. (The parcel was previously occupied by four buildings - now destroyed - as shown on the aerial above.)

In Spring 2008, Interboro was asked by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) to develop a design for a large sculpture garden on a prominent and vacant site in Soho. The project, eventually entitled 'Lent Space', had an unusual parameter: it should be designed and built for a three to five year life span, after which it would be replaced by a large residential tower. The landowner, who was partnering with the LMCC for the project, had just started the lengthy and politically-charged process of changing the site's zoning from industrial to residential, and was hoping that the temporary provision of a public amenity would help the rezoning process along.

The project's program and scope was shaped by the sometimes conflicting aspirations of these two primary stakeholders: the LMCC (as represented by its chief curator) and the landowner. The LMCC curator had his own agenda related to the selection and display of art. The landowner hoped to improve her relations with the surrounding community by providing a temporary open space; yet, she didn't want the project to look 'too permanent' to avoid the community getting accustomed to having a neighborhood park and demanding that it remain in perpetuity. Additionally, the landowner required that the entire site be enclosed by a fence.
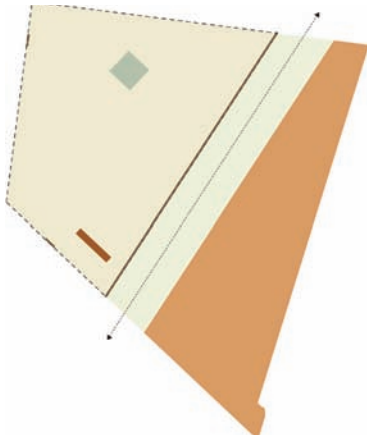
Fig. 16. At night, the fence is closed. The public can use the street as a throughway.
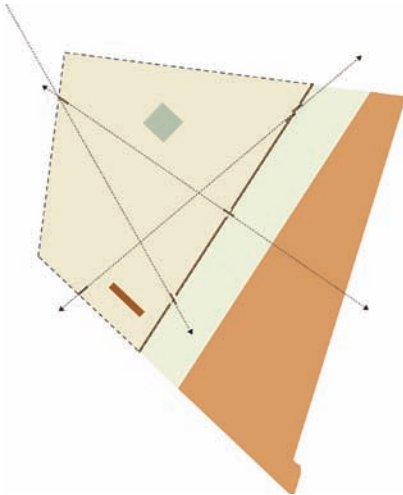

Fig. 17. On typical days, certain panels will be pivoted open to encourage pedestrian shortcuts through the site.
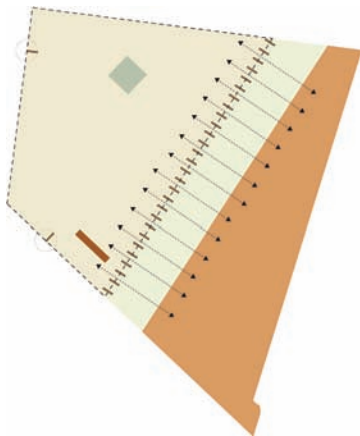

Fig. 18. During special events, all of the panels will be pivoted open, creating a logia, blurring the boundary between inside and outside.
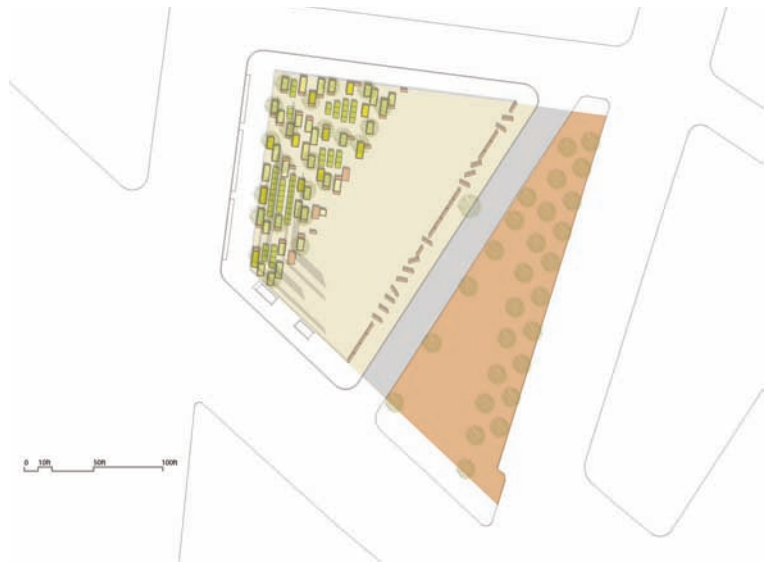

Fig. 19. The site is organized in bands: to the west is a planted threshold composed of individual planter boxes, in the center is a 'program' space, to the east is a fence made of rotating panels.

We organised the site by creating two thresholds along the east and west sides of the site, framing a large, open 'program' space in between. On the east side, we introduced an operable fence made of pivoting panels. The fence's open-ness or closed-ness depends on each panel's rotation. At night when the park is closed, all of the panels line up to create a barrier to prevent people from entering. On an average day, a number of panels are rotated to open up the site along primary pedestrian desire lines, running from building entries to subway entrances, for example. In this way, the opening of these paths encourages people to use the space as an everyday shortcut. At special events and on weekends, all panels are rotated ninety degrees to completely open the eastern edge of the site, creating a logia-like condition that blurs the boundaries between what is perceived as inside and outside of the site.

The west side of the site faces Varick Street, a corridor with many office buildings. On this western edge, we proposed a planted threshold. This zone is filled with a variety of modular planters containing grasses, shrubs and trees. The planters are clustered to create primary paths through the site (that coincide with the pedestrian desire lines mentioned above), as well as smaller discrete spaces between planters to sit. Given this landscape's proximity to the neighborhood's large office population, we expect that this area will be heavily used by office workers at lunch time and during smoke breaks. Through these design moves—such as opening up the site and creating amenities for constituents not identified in our client's brief (smokers, vendors, area high school students)—we sought to increase the public-ness of the space.

The primary design intervention—the operable fence—looks more like a piece of furniture that could be moved off of the site rather than a permanent installation. Thus, the fence fulfilled the landowner's requirement that the site be physically enclosed and not look too permanent; yet, as an urban design element, it is quite ambiguous. (What is it? Is it a fence? What's inside versus outside, public versus private and so on.) For us, the fence offered an opportunity to add an agenda to the project. In this case, the added agenda—which was to make an enclosed,

Fig. 20. (Overleaf, above) View of the site looking east. Photo: Michael Falco

Fig. 21. (Overleaf, below) View of the planters Photo: Michael Falco

Fig. 22. The fence is made public by adding a bench and a surface for art (the band above the 'window'). By changing the fences' rotations, a variety of different social seating areas can be created.
Photo: Dean Kaufman

privately-owned site as open and as accessible as possible—was in opposition to the landowner's requirements. So while we enclosed the site, we also undermined the fence; on the one hand, by making it operable and thus permeable during most of the day, but more importantly, on the other hand, by making the fence itself public, turning it into an object that can be interpreted, used, and appropriated in many different ways.

We used this way of thinking on other parts of the project as well. While both the client and the landowner wanted to have some planting to 'soften' the space, we believed it was important to conceive of the planting plan as temporary. We hated the idea of planting and cultivating a large garden that would be destroyed at the project's end after a couple of years. Our planting concept conceives of the sculpture garden as a tree farm, as a landscape incubator for the area. Our plan is as follows: In Year One, nursery trees will be planted on site. In Year Three, after those trees reach a sufficient size, they will be transferred to pits on neighboring streets to become street trees. In Year Four, the cycle will be repeated with more street trees being planted. In Year Five, when the owner starts construction on her new building, all of the planters will be moved to neighboring public spaces. So while the sculpture garden is open and operating, people can see the materials for the future open space network of the neighborhood.

Fig. 23. Here you can see how we imagine this working over time. In Year One, nursery trees will be planted on site.

Fig. 24. In Year Three, after those trees reach a sufficient size they will be transferred to pits on neighboring streets to become street trees.

Fig. 25. In Year Four, the cycle will be repeated, with more street trees being planted.

Fig. 26. In Year Five, when the owner starts construction on her new building, all of the planters will be moved to neighboring public spaces.

Fig. 27. The fences have a central axis around which they can be rotated. Photo: Michael Falco

Of course, this concept worked very well to address the landowner's fears about the community getting too accustomed to having a garden; the garden wouldn't disappear but move and expand. But for us, it offered the opportunity to build in an environmental and urban agenda into the project.

Rethinking Advocacy

In summary, *'Choose a Cause', 'Create a Constituency',* and *'Add an Agenda'* represent operations that seek to rethink the role of advocacy in contemporary architecture and planning. Rather than replicating the Davidoff model of advocacy planning, where the planner works within her traditional professional boundaries, planners and architects should re-tool advocacy so that it is interdisciplinary, speculative, and ultimately more expansive about who and what to fight for. This requires seeing the practice beyond the traditional boundaries of the master plan or the building. Rethinking what deliverables or products to provide, upending the convention that every project should start with a client's need, and embedding social, political, or environmental agendas into the projects we pursue, these all depend on us keeping an open mind about what we do. These approaches or modes of operation aren't intended as an advocacy 'check-list', but instead suggest that architects and planners should be more opportunistic and entrepreneurial, finding or inventing a specific approach for each specific situation. As risky as this may be, this can enable us to most agilely advocate for particular outcomes, and lend agency to our desire to influence and shape the physical landscape.

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