

Strengthen our Commons, Build our Community**The Cultural Commons Project**

The Design Studio brings multiple issues, practitioners, and disciplines together under the pretext of generating new possibilities in the field of social justice. In the case of the Cultural Commons Project, we bridge together people who care about culture, the commons, sustainable community development, and the spaces in between those sectors. In the process, we are forging links between people's everyday life, environmental justice, cultural resistance, the aftermath of Katrina's devastation, and re-imagining community development and enlisting engagement from such unlikely allies as a brass band in New Orleans and a native Hawaiian artist and creator of *Polyfantastica*, a comic book.

With New Orleans as the most explicit case, local communities are experiencing economic and social upheaval at an unprecedented speed and scale. In the wake of aggressive redevelopment, what is left is wholesale removal of people from their places, destruction of social networks, and dismantling of the cultural commons. How do we support the vitality of life that makes our places special, keeps our communities healthy, and resists predatory planning?¹ The Design Studio for Social Intervention is taking on these questions with their Cultural Commons Project. This initiative connects cultural and community development practitioners to build networks that can support the survival of the cultural commons and imagine new possibilities for sustainable development.

In an effort to develop tools and practice that would support equitable rebuilding of the Gulf region that includes cultural practitioners as a community asset, we designed a project that would draw from the strengths of three regions: The Southwest, the Pacific Islands, and the Gulf Coast region. Hawaii is often thought of as a place for exotic vacation, leisure, and pleasure for outsiders. But Native Hawaiians are suffering from public health epidemics, sprawling development, and privatization of whole ecosystems. The local practitioners understand they are engaged in a struggle, have developed organizations that experience victories around these struggles, and are looking to develop solidarity in a national arena.

What is the cultural commons?

We define the cultural commons as that which is held in common in a specific place; a set of cultural practices or resources accessible to members of that community, including combination of cultural and natural resources.

While discourse around the commons often point to public spaces or ideas collectively owned and maintained, the cultural commons speaks to a large range of cultural practices and practitioners that contributes to a rich cultural infrastructure with broad participation. The cultural commons can often be rooted historically in local traditions, but may also be manifested in an evolution combining new and old cultures and traditions. The brass bands in New Orleans, master hula dancers in Hawai'i are all examples of cultural forms that exist specifically in a local setting. When that place is destroyed, the people scattered elsewhere, that culture faces the threat of extinction.

We at the Design Studio for Social Intervention assert that true community development must include an understanding of the commons as a social platform upon which life happens. We believe that strengthening the cultural commons is an equally important part of developing a community that is good to its members as well as the earth. Economic development that does not support the cultural commons can destroy the very community that it was intended to support. Therefore true community and economic development must integrate the strengthening the strengths of the cultural commons into its framework for building strong, healthy communities.

¹ Nagel, Kiara, "Understanding Place After Katrina: Predatory Planning and Cultural Resistance in New Orleans' Treme Neighborhood." MA Thesis. Department of Urban Studies and Planning. MIT, 2006.



The Architects

In Hawaii we met with a variety of architects of the cultural commons: a master Hula teacher and cultural rights activist who is currently fighting intellectual property rights battles, a visual artist who is coming up with a new form of Pokemon cards to connect youth to Hawaiian culture and environmentalism, a family deeply engaged in struggles over sovereign land rights, a lomilomi teacher and his class that is learning this traditional healing massage technique and offering it as a service to their community, and a *kapuna* (elder) caretaking an exquisite stretch of land and black sand beach and mentoring the young surfers who flock there.

Connection to Place

One aspect of the commons that became apparent was the linkages between people, culture and place. Whether summoning inspiration from a sacred site or building a school and curriculum to pass on Hawaiian culture, each cultural architect spoke of their practice as site specific and deeply connected to the land or place they occupied. It was almost as if place serves as the incubator of cultural practice. The land, the earth, the volcanoes, the beaches, the mountains are all present in stories of past and life of present. The places make up sacred sites, connections to cosmology, creation myths. They are also the best surf spots, tourist destinations, and natural treasures.



Encroachment and Enclosure

Each of the architects is actively resisting different forms of encroachment or threats of enclosure. Sovereign land struggles are a hot debate throughout Hawaii, and people are fighting for the land that has supported their people for generations. The Hula teacher and her students are opposing restrictions that would keep them from gathering the grasses and plants they need to make hula lei and bracelets. The *kapuna's* beach is being encroached upon by the state and environmental researchers who would like to see the area restricted. The *lomilomi* teacher is hoping to pass his teachings down to his students so this healing art is not lost, but meanwhile non-Hawaiians are learning the craft and charging fees in violation of traditional practice. Many architects spoke to us about the importance of the taro plant to Hawaiian culture and resistance to current efforts to genetically patent taro. Just as the cultural commons take diverse forms, so too do the forms of encroachment and enclosure that endanger these places that incubate vital cultural practices.



*"The cultural commons are difficult to recognize, as our participation in them is largely part of the taken for granted experience of everyday life. Awareness of their loss too often occurs after they have been enclosed --when it is too late to resist."*²

Strengthening the Cultural Commons

How do we recognize the contributions of the cultural commons and its architects before it is too late? One intervention we saw frequently in Hawaii was the deliberate instruction of culture passed on to younger generations, such as the culturally-based charter schools that are teaching young people knowledge of traditional practices. The charter school network is also feeding a resurgence of native Hawaiian language among young people. Several of the cultural commons architects we

² Bowers, Chet. *Relevance of Revitalizing the Commons to Spiritual Covenants*. Network of Spiritual Progressives. August 30 2006.

met were carefully forging intergenerational linkages. Their understanding of the importance of teaching their craft to the next generation is explicit and overt.

The work of building and strengthening the cultural commons is exciting, vibrant work but its architects are not being supported or compensated for the gifts they provide. How does economic development incorporate an understanding of the services and products of these architects beyond strictly financial terms?

We are calling for a national movement that bridges site-specific cultural commons architects together, linking people, places, and culture in the fight against predatory planning and contribute to the building of healthy, sustainable communities across the country and beyond. In doing so we aim to expand the specific struggles beyond local communities and build the larger capacity and agenda necessary to act on a larger scale in support of the cultural commons.

DS4SI is dedicated to changing how social change is imagined, developed and deployed here in the United States. We are creating a design studio for the progressive arm of the nonprofit sector in order to support the sector's ability to create new forms of effective social intervention and the exploration of new ways to be interventionists.