Place, Space, & People

by Candace O'Connor

As a child, Michael Willis lived in the Pruitt-Igoe public housing development, a cluster of 33 St. Louis high-rises that became national symbols of poor social planning. Elevators stopped on every other floor; there were few services nearby for families or recreational facilities for children. Not surprisingly, Pruitt-Igoe deteriorated, its corridors infested with crime, and was finally demolished in the mid-1970s, with the first buildings famously dynamited in 1972. Michael was there as an observer when he was a Washington University architecture student.

Today, Willis, AB '73, MArch '76, MSW '76, heads a San Francisco-based architectural firm, Michael Willis Architects, dedicated to doing things differently. In their projects, which include affordable public housing, they focus on three elements: a thorough understanding of how people will live in or use the space; a close connection to the surrounding community; and sustainability throughout the life of the project — all things Pruitt-Igoe did not have.

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Michael Willis, AB '73, MArch '76, MSW '76

Willis, like other graduates of Washington University's joint architecture and social work program, has made his career at the intersection of these two fields, which traditionally have had little to do with one another. Yet there are signs that this may be changing nationally as urban design gains in importance and as community-related projects — such as senior citizen housing or the rehabilitation of homes in decaying neighborhoods — attract a new generation of architects and social workers.

"Over the past 10 years, the relationship of architecture and the community has become an important topic," says Bruce Lindsey, dean of the College of Architecture and Graduate School of Architecture & Urban Design in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University. "Cultural and social interactions are framed by architecture, and the things we do as architects affect the way in which we interact with our environment and each other."

Through the lens of architecture and more specifically through his work with the Rural Studio in Hale County, Alabama, Lindsey knows that engaging communities in the process of creating their own solutions is a recipe for success.

"Architect Samuel Mockbee, who founded the Rural Studio, believed that architects have a role to play in driving social and environmental change. The Rural Studio has been at the forefront of melding design with community advocacy. This pulls directly from social work, which has advocacy as part of its roots."

Michael Willis

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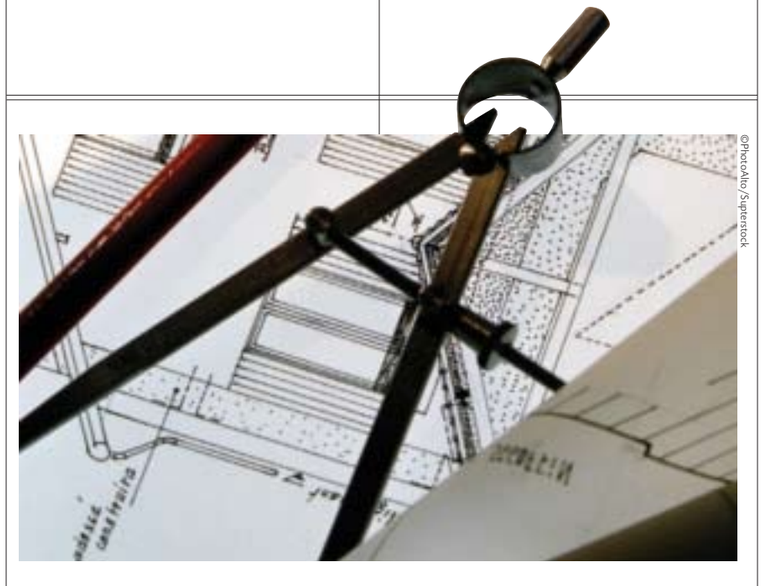
Willis agrees and stresses the importance of listening to what communities have to say. "We learned early that the genius of a community-based project lies in the community itself; that if we have a power it's in eliciting real direction from a community and then turning that into design. For us it's the road we started on."

Washington University came early to this issue by establishing its joint MArch and MSW program, which has trained a small but steady stream of students to consider social needs in their design work. One of them is Steven Wilke-Shapiro, AB '97, MArch '00, MSW '00, who realized as an architecture undergraduate that "a whole lot of education and professional practice happens in an insulated environment. Architects tend to practice design behind the computer and don't really have the time to understand the relationship between design and community development."

In his job as project manager at Fendler and Associates in St. Louis, Wilke-Shapiro uses the skills he learned from his joint degree in two

Bruce Lindsey



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ways: first, on a "micro level," by helping individual clients who live in distressed areas work through renovation problems and develop a plan that fits the way they live; second, on a broader scale, by working with redevelopers of old neighborhoods to consider their social context, including easy, lighted access to local parks.

"One client was a woman with a son in a wheelchair. She was looking to renovate her house in a way that would make it easier for him to get around," he says. "I was able to sit with them and help them figure out how they wanted the house to work, not just how the space should look, and then translate that into design."

A current student in the joint program is Wayne Mortensen, who chose this combination so he could use the built environment to deal with social problems such as poverty, homelessness, or income stratification. Eventually, he sees himself working with nonprofits to help them better define themselves, linking their mission to their physical space needs. "I view myself less as an architect than as a catalyst for social engagement," he says.

Indeed, some projects completed by Michael Willis and his colleagues show that it is possible to do both. In the wake of 1998 welfare-to-work legislation, they created a prototype Self-Sufficiency Center for Alameda County as a place where employment services would be offered to clients. Its warm, light-infused environment would reassure anxious clients, while its clear, simple design would make the center easy to navigate.

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1998

Welfare-to-Work legislation passed Congress

1972

The first buildings in Pruitt-Igoe public housing development in St. Louis were demolished.

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"There was no template for how to do this," says Willis. "And so our first task was to hold a visioning session with county staff, supervisors, and citizen-clients to figure out the shape of this new landscape and to create a conceptual ideal of the new Welfare-to-Work office place. We then designed the model, which could be replicated throughout the county."

This attention to the needs of the client, along with their comfort and peace of mind, is also critical in medical services. At St. Louis Children's Hospital, says John Bricout, designers are "quite interested in how their adroit use of space and place will have an impact, if not on the recovery of the children, then certainly on the quality of their experience in the hospital."

Bricout, formerly an associate professor at the Brown School, is now associate director for research at University of Central Florida School of Social Work. "Place, space, and people come together in many areas: for recreation, entertainment, and in my research, for employment. By asking questions about the intersection of architecture and social work, we will be able to create new interventions that will have, we hope, a more sustained and deeper impact on social problems." ⌘

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