

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Learning Extended [EDRA / Places Awards]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5kf6s1ck>

### Journal

Places, 12(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

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### Publication Date

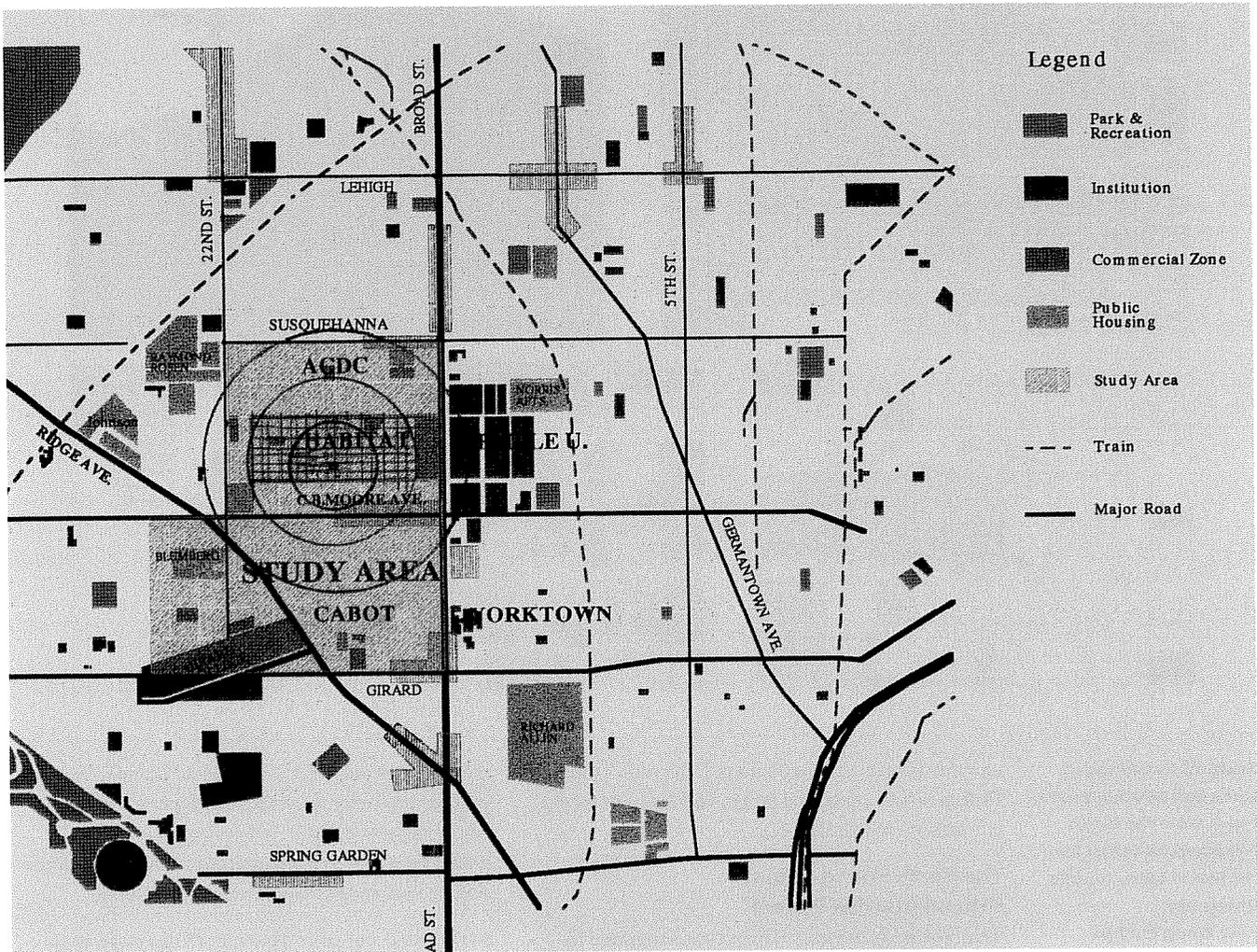
1998-10-01

Peer reviewed

Donlyn Lyndon

# Learning Extended

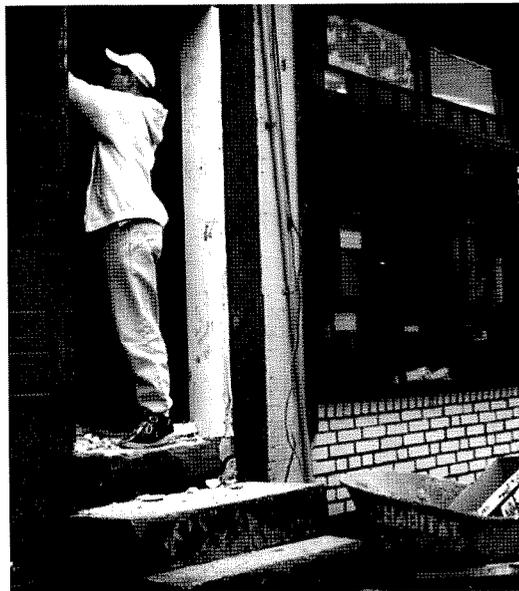




One of the most encouraging developments chronicled by the EDRA/*Places* competition was that a significant number of submissions were university-based studio explorations designed to register and accumulate information and develop design strategies in a rigorous way, sometimes over a several year period.

These submissions revealed the great potential for well-directed student projects to provide a backbone of research, exploration and communication that can provide real services to underprivileged communities while at the same time introducing students to the life experience of people outside the normal circuits of academic and professional engagement.

The work that students do in these contexts leads to a gradual, not dramatic, change in the conditions at hand — not least because these studies, when properly conducted, lead their participants not only to new understandings of the present conditions but also to a language of hope regarding prospects for immediate action and long-term renewal. These studies also can lead to processes that will change the academic environment in which people study.



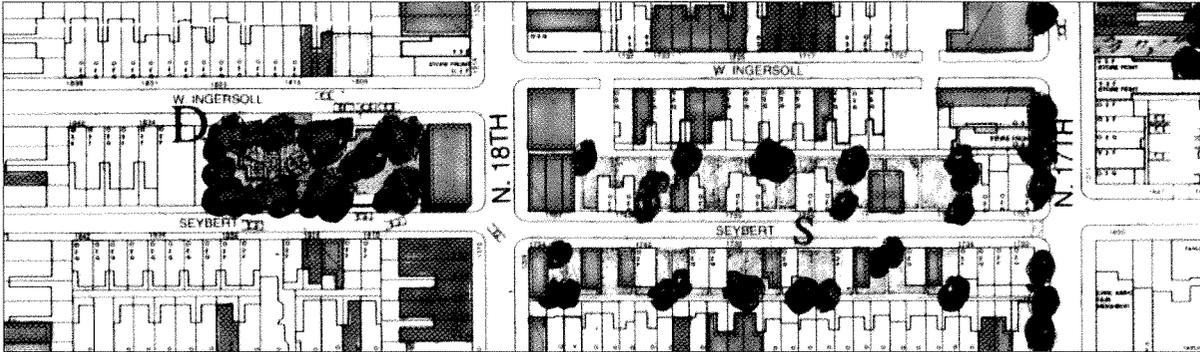
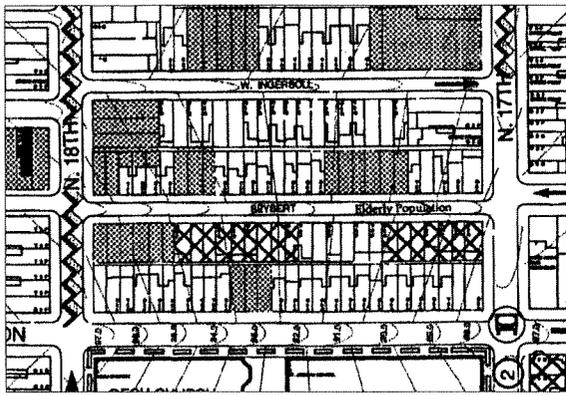
Two of the projects submitted for review stood out as being especially instructive. One was the North Philadelphia Urban Initiative Project, developed by Temple University's Department of Architecture over the course of several years. The second was the Massa-

*facing page:* Proposed plaza, from the North Philadelphia Urban Initiatives Project.

*this page:* Urban analysis and participatory research from the North Philadelphia project.

*Graphics:* Temple University Department of Architecture

*Photo:* Sally Harrison



**Study of dwelling patterns and housing prototypes from the North Philadelphia Urban Initiatives Project, Temple University.**

Photo: Doug Phillips

achusetts Institute of Technology Urban and Housing Project, which presented design and research for the city of Karimabad, Pakistan.

**The North Philadelphia Urban Initiative Project**

The North Philadelphia project was supported initially by a grant from the Urban Community Service Program, a project of the U.S. Department of Education. It has since evolved into a continuing project for training programs for neighborhood residences, several small construction initiatives and work with Habitat for Humanity, involving students in both planning and construction.

A key element of the project's success has been the careful documentation of the neighborhood structure and activities over a period of several years. The incremental, patient approach that has been used in approaching the neighborhood has been equally important. The directors of the program, Professors Sally Harrison and John Collins, have worked within a set of sound expectations, neither hoping for dramatic, highly imageable transformation nor succumbing to despair and indifference in the face of what at first may have seemed like overwhelming obstacles — urban fragmentation, decay and degradation.

Instead, the project has been developed with an understanding of the current state of the environment as one stage in a continuing evolution of the city — a stage that may pose its own creative and incremental

renewal over time, if it is neither subjected to large transformative forces of the marketplace, nor abandoned as beyond repair, but evaluated in a close-grained way, discovering opportunities that are accessible to local initiatives and modest resources.

As the project organizers wrote: *Design propositions were made at both the neighborhood scale and at the scale of material inhabitation, seeking to establish continuity or reciprocity between larger and smaller spatio-temporal contexts. Design propositions sought to unearth opportunities present in the conditions of decay, but exploited, and to work with the physical context, and with the trend to lower density of population and building to open space.*

*Proposals suggest carefully restructuring the physical fragments of the existing context according to a paradigm more sustainable and habitable than that which had determined original development and subsequent renewal schemes. This reweaving approach lends itself to incremental implementation, and use and reuse of local resources — both human and material. It is more accessible to small community developers, and more able to be assimilated as on-going, more locally profitable neighborhood undertakings.*

*The work undertaken by the Urban Initiatives project has begun to recast urban designing as a process of creative community activity, rather than a top-down bureaucratic imperative. This is a broadly integrative process that is appropriately initiated in an academic context, providing both students and community members the means to act knowingly upon the neighborhood context.*

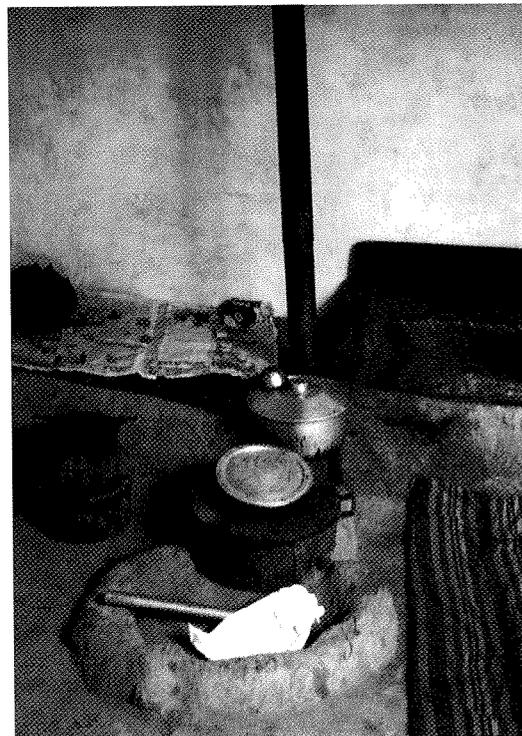
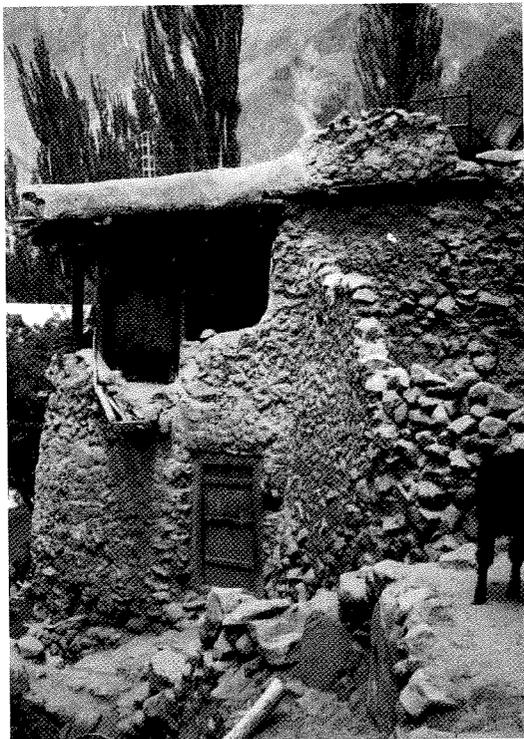
**Urban and Housing Project,  
Karimabad, Pakistan**

A second notable example was conducted in Karimabad, Pakistan, by faculty and students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Architecture, and led by Professors John R. Myer, William L. Porter and Masood Khan. Again, the project has taken place over several years, with the first site visit in 1994. This project was notable for its detailed efforts to know and make judgments about the cultural and technical factors that presently lead to vernacular forms in the region and to patterns of use associated with them.

The project is exemplary in that it brought an interdisciplinary team of students, faculty and consultants into a remote area of Pakistan and examined carefully the living spaces and customs, as well as the traditional materials and ways of building. The team then made patterns for modest innovations that would allow the addition of housing in the area without disruption to

Both these projects have developed information for communities in need, and done so with a degree of careful observation and investigation that would not be possible within the market forces of the profession. In so doing they have also developed new strategies for incremental improvements that offer the prospect of significant change without major transformations of the economy and social structure of the places being studied. They represent a kind of careful, critical, but patient investigation that is both productive for the places in question and of enormous value in bringing students of environmental design to recognize the conditions and circumstances that pertain in communities outside their personal, academic and professional experience.

Conducted in a vacuum, and carelessly, such programs can be misleading and exploitative. Conducted with the ingenuity, cross-discipline network of resources and the deliberate, long term patterns of investigation that these examples project, they can lead to outcomes



**Traditional residential exterior and interior views of dwellings in Karimabad, Pakistan, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology housing research project.**  
*Photos: Duncan Kincaid, Margaret Myer, Jonathan Blair*

existing conditions and ways of inhabiting the site. They also proposed a series of technical innovations in construction, using readily available natural materials, along with the introduction of strategically selected new products and processes to increase the stability and insulation value of construction in the Hunza Valley, which has severe climate swings and is subject to considerable seismic activity.

that benefit both the immediate places at hand and the young professionals who will be responsible for future change in our environments.