

Students share illuminating studies of urban issues in the real world

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Nico Calavita, a public administration professor at both San Diego State and the University of California San Diego, had a sobering message in his recent address to this year's crop of UCSD urban studies students:

"Beware the real world outside."

For the UCSD students, there already had been plenty of reality checking extending beyond the ivory tower. Sixty-one of them, mostly graduating seniors, balanced their natural idealism with six months of field research and internships on real-world issues.

They shared their findings at the 16th annual Urban Studies Expo, held last month at UCSD's Price Center.

The students complemented their 20-to 30-page papers with colorful and often highly professional posters and summary displays in one of the center's ballrooms. They invited friends and families to take in the wide range of topics – from binge drinking on campus to integrating gays and lesbians into suburban neighborhoods.

Housing-related issues drew many students' interest, including Marina Hauze, whose paper was titled "Everyone Deserves Design: An examination of affordable housing design recommendations and actual practices in San Diego County."

She won one of two \$500 awards for academic excellence.

She traced the development of public housing from its roots in 1930s Depression America, when small garden apartment clusters predominated, to post-World War II high-rises that became plagued by crime and alienation, to today's swing back to small-is-beautiful complexes.

"The shift from 1950s design to present practices was initiated by the horrible conditions of high-rise public housing and the flawed design values," Hauze said, "which became no longer well received in the planning or public world as so many projects failed."

One of the problems faced by public-housing advocates, she said, is that good design has often been viewed as a frill that could not be covered in a stripped-to-the-essentials construction budget.

Hauze decided to create her own score sheet by creating a rubric of 84 design principles to use in judging San Diego-area subsidized housing projects. The same checklist would come in handy for anyone looking for a place to live.

She visited four projects for about an hour each and jotted down the presence or absence of desirable items. They included details such as "personal additions to units," such as flower pots, "sufficient lighting," on-site facilities like meeting places and laundry rooms, and security provisions, such as entry barriers, buffer zones and unit privacy.

She was also mindful of project-area neighbors' concerns about living near low-income housing.

"Residents of a community will be more reluctant to welcome affordable housing to their neighborhood if the units don't reflect the character and existing style of the community," she said.

"Therefore, architecture plays a huge role in the acceptability of affordable projects. If a project is designed thoughtfully with integration in mind, it works to dispel the stigma attached to affordable housing, while adding to the aesthetic value of a neighborhood rather than detracting from it."

But Hauze said architects and city planners ought to keep in mind that functionality still plays a part in design.

Elaborate landscaping might be attractive, she said, but if residents can't use the open space, it becomes nonfunctional.

"The important point is that each decorative element should somehow serve the residents, not restrict them," she said.

Hauze praised the architecture firm Studio E's Emerald Garden townhome project in Escondido, where some residents install wind chimes and plants at the front entrance.

She also liked architect Carlos Rodriguez' signature design specification that front doors be painted different colors as a way to individualize the homes.

Since gardens and back yards tend to be rather small in subsidized housing projects, Hauze said some architects have found a clever way to use the front yard.

For example, Studio E's Orange Place in Escondido includes a small lawn area along the sidewalk, a second raised lawn area behind a low wall and a third lawn area behind a higher wall next to the front door.

"Not only is this approach aesthetically appealing, but it creates the same effect as a fence would without the inherent isolation," she said. "This way, residents have enclosed private spaces and semiprivate open areas . . . to create a comfortable transition through the space hierarchy."

Another technique Hauze spotted was to locate mailboxes together and link adjoining patios – both aimed at encouraging neighbors to meet one another and develop greater community cohesion.

Interior floor plan layouts can boost "eyes on the street," do-it-yourself surveillance, she said. Examples she saw put the living room and kitchen in the front of the house, rather in the rear, to make it easy for parents to keep a lookout for children and strangers outside.

But Hauze said good ideas sometimes run afoul of city and county regulators, especially engineering and safety departments "which hardly ever deviate from their requirements." Architects can overcome such rules by gaining community support to bend policies.

However, design only goes so far, she said. Architecture cannot solve social problems by itself.

"The lofty visions of architects do not always function best in reality," she conceded. "Design and architecture must be placed in a larger social context and act collaboratively with other elements to achieve safe, livable communities."

Other student papers in the housing category offered some interesting perspectives:

Angela Bushard took to task the ABC-TV reality show, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." After three years of watching, she concluded that the show has increasingly become a vehicle for advertising-driven product placements and less a feel-good story about improving a family's living conditions.

Caitlin B. Boon analyzed college graduates who have decided to buy homes with one or more housemates as a way to build equity and avoid high-cost renting. She said "conjunctive home ownership" makes sense in San Diego where college-educated, high-tech industry employees, though earning high salaries, cannot afford to buy individually.

Heera Basi analyzed Mexican immigrants' adaptation to American housing design, noting that rural immigrants have trouble coping with urban housing that lacks space for growing crops and livestock. U.S. apartment complexes also do an unsatisfactory job of accommodating large Mexican households because of the lack of sizable gathering spaces.

Hannah Borris disputed the widely held feeling that civic participation is on the decline by following the hands-on planning at Scripps Park at La Jolla Cove. "Perhaps local planning efforts are not only the responsibility of local governments and private developers," she concluded, "but possibly, perhaps, some contemporary planning efforts are the direct responsibility of the community and its citizens."

Kanishka Karunaratne looked at ways to create transitional housing for homeless families and concluded that a joint effort by North County cities worked well to develop a project in Vista. "Regional unity is a benefit to homeless housing and will allow for the creation of additional transitional developments if properly utilized," she said.


For more information on the UCSD urban studies program, see the UCSD Regional Workbench Consortium's Web site, regionalworkbench.org, and navigate to the Education Center and student research home page.

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