Like many American cities, Richmond, Virginia is pockmarked by once middle-class neighborhoods that have fallen into decline and are now blighted by decayed and abandoned buildings. Among the more severely depressed areas of Richmond is the historic Blackwell district. Decades ago, in an effort to provide homes for the poorest of Richmond’s citizens, row after row of nondescript, multi-family, brick-faced, public housing units or “projects” were erected in Blackwell. By the end of the 20th century, their boarded windows, crumbling infrastructures, and graffiti covered facades were sad but eloquent monuments to ineffectual governmental policies and the unrelenting poverty and despair of Blackwell’s irresolute residents.

Taking advantage of grants made available by HOPE VI, a federal program of HUD aimed at revitalizing severely distressed public housing and addressing the social needs of their residents (HUD, 1999), Richmond’s Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA) targeted Blackwell for revitalization. The RRHA plan called for the demolition of 440 outdated run-down public housing units and the relocation of hundreds of families pending the construction of 99 new multi-family
housing units. The plan also proposed development of programs aimed at encouraging Blackwell's residents to envision a better future for themselves and their neighborhood.

The Blackwell Summer Arts Program was one of several social action initiatives aimed at revitalizing the "lives of Blackwell residents" (Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, 1999b). The first phase of the program, which was held during the summer of 1999, called for a series of community-focused art workshops for 24 Blackwell neighborhood youngsters. The goal set for the program was that the children participate in developing "a vision for the future of Blackwell" (Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, 1999a) by identifying built features that should be retained or included in the ideal Blackwell community. The arts program was conceived as a collaborative effort involving staff members, representatives and/or resources from RRHA, the Boys and Girls Club, the Blackwell Tenants Council, The Blackwell Community Civic Association, and the city of Richmond's Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities, with the curriculum, instructors and instruction being provided by Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Dr. Charles Bleick, Chair of VCU's Art Education Department, applied for and received a small grant from the Community Service Associates Program through the Office of Community Programs, Virginia Commonwealth University to purchase supplies and hire two Richmond City Public Schools art teachers as workshop instructors. Together Bleick and the teachers designed and taught a curriculum of activities that would introduce the children to aspects of community planning and the challenges associated with planning and designing an ideal community (Bleich, 1999).

The participating children of the project were given disposable cameras and directed to explore the neighborhood with their parents and photograph features of the area that, as important community "landmarks," should be preserved. Interestingly, the majority of the photographs taken—and therefore the features identified as important—were not built or environmental elements, but the human features of community (e.g., the children's neighbors, friends, and family members). Nevertheless, the children were encouraged to make works of art based on physical features they would like to preserve or have constructed in the new Blackwell. The drawings and paintings created by the children were submitted to the RRHA, whose stated intention was that these be reproduced on large signs and placed in prominent Blackwell locations selected by the children. (By October, 2000, no signs created from the children's image had been posted in any publicly visible area of Richmond.)

The Blackwell Summer Arts Program, 2000

My association with the Blackwell Summer Arts Program began during the early summer of 2000 when Dr. Bleick to invited me to act as co-supervisor of instruction for a second series of workshops. During these workshops, the young participants were to be involved in designing a neighborhood park for the revitalized area. Residents of Blackwell had already been using the proposed park site as a recreational area, but only a small portion of it had been developed for organized recreational purposes. The remainder of the site had been only marginally developed. This large two-block tract of land presented a number of design problems. During recent construction on Jefferson Davis Highway, a major thoroughfare a few blocks to the west, runoff water had been diverted towards the park. This dictated the inclusion of a water retention feature. Heavily trafficked Maury Street bordered the park to the north and separated the park from a newly finished elementary school and the proposed housing units. Entrance to the
park would need to include safe passage across this street. Also, city planners hoped to keep most of the mature on-site trees and an already existing multipurpose structure (a combination athletic equipment storage area, refreshment stand and gazebo) intact. These considerations set some parameters for the park design. But other site features, like an exposed bluff of earth that ran the length of the park and created an extreme elevation variation, might be altered or enhanced.

This social engagement program, like the previous workshop series, was to be a collaboration of personnel and resources of the RRHA, the Boys and Girls Club, the Blackwell Tenants Council, the Blackwell Community Civic Association, the city of Richmond's Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities, and Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Charles Bleick and I, as representatives of VCU's Art Education Department, were again asked to provide a curriculum that supported the intentions of the various agencies and to provide instructors, instruction, and instructional materials necessary for the actualization of the workshops. Funding for this purpose was again sought and received from the university's Community Service Associates Program.

Dr. Bleick and I agreed that the success of the project would rest largely on the shoulders of the workshop instructors. It was important, therefore, to select instructors who shared in our vision for the program, were comfortable working with children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and had knowledge and pedagogical skills appropriate to the task. Also, the instructors would need the confidence and conviction to pilot this program through shoals of contradictory agenda that were the concern of various supportive agencies. VCU students James Francis and Cristian Koshock fit that description. Although still undergraduates, Francis and Koshock were non-traditional students who had had previous experiences instructing youth from diverse cultural backgrounds. They also shared a holistic philosophy of education and had worked together previously in collaborative projects. Guided by the VCU faculty supervisors, they designed activities aimed at engaging the participating youngsters in the planning and design of a community park and, in a broader sense, at helping students better understand how "features of a well functioning community are developed" (Bleick, 2000).

An Improvised Beginning
From the beginning, this second project phase was hampered by the fact that, although the demolition of nearly all the 440 housing units had been completed, the new housing units had not yet been built. Nearly all residents of the Blackwell public housing projects had been relocated to temporary sites outside the area. In other words, there were few, if any, children now living in the Blackwell neighborhood. Children of the former (and presumably future) residents of the area would have to be identified and recruited. The children who participated in the 1999 program had been identified through their association with the Boys and Girls Club, but with no children being presently served by the Blackwell branch of that organization, the task of identifying participants was assigned to an employee of the Department of Parks and Recreation. However, at the urging of a representative of the Blackwell Community Association, the starting date for the project had been moved up several weeks so as not to conflict with the dates of a popular summer church camp event. The new starting-date coincided with the preplanned vacations of several key project personnel, including the person assigned to identify and recruit youth for participation in the project. On the afternoon of the Kick-Off day, with refreshments prepared, instructional materials readied, and photographers, publicists, and representatives from the participating organizations scheduled to attend the gala event, it became apparent
only 6 children had been identified and enrolled! A frantic effort to increase participation numbers had members of the Blackwell Community Civic Association driving through relocation sites to invite and collect children from off the streets, until, over the course of the three-hour session, 28 children had arrived. In the next two weeks, this number would drop (due either to lack of interest or commitments to other activities) and stabilize at 15 self-selected, committed youngsters who ranged in age from 8 to 15.

Project classes were to be held in an activity room of the newly constructed Blackwell Community Center, but this space immediately proved inadequate. The central cooling units would not function in the space assigned to us. Working conditions were impossible without use of a large noisy portable fan, but its use rendered it impossible to hear presentations or conduct group discussions. Storage space was also inadequate for the project needs. Therefore, during the project's second week, activities were re-located to the older Boys and Girls Club building, where the facilities were more appropriate to the project's needs.

Transportation to and from the sessions presented another problem that would be a continued annoyance throughout the project. Volunteer drivers using Parks and Recreation vehicles had to travel to areas where displaced Blackwell residents now lived in order to collect the participating children of the workshops. Evidently there was some difficulty locating pick-up and drop-off sites, because some children were consistently delivered or picked up late, and, on one occasion, several children were delivered to the wrong site altogether.

These and other logistical problem compelled Francis and Koshock to take ownership of the project through overseeing and following up on scheduled presentations, activities, equipment, and spaces. Of course, the participating children were not oblivious to these operational difficulties. As the instructors addressed and made adaptations in order to overcome situational obstacles, they modeled problem-solving behaviors and encouraged the children to participate in like activity as concerned members of the affected group.

**Beginnings of a Community**

Representatives of the various participating agencies helped determine the early activities of the workshops by suggesting that professionals in areas of park and city planning or environmental issues provide the youngsters with basic information about these topics. The series of activities began with tours of the Blackwell site and of three other popular Richmond City Parks, during which the children, using disposable cameras, photographed features they might like to retain or replicate in the new park. Then, during consecutive sessions, professionals presented specialized information to the children. An experienced educator from the University of Virginia conducted a lesson about environmental issues and problems of environmental stewardship. An RRHA architect demonstrated concepts of architectural scale. The director of the city's Public Art Program showed visual examples of art works created for public projects. Finally, a city planner of water works informed the children about the impact of water drainage on the site. Although they listened politely to the presentations of these professionals, during the earliest of the sessions the children demonstrated little sense of themselves as constituting a community. Boisterous quarrels or petty squabbles often erupted during the activity periods. Clearly the children would have to come to recognize themselves as members of a community before they could begin planning a park for their extended community.

The first two presenters had included built-in activities with their presentations. Following the third presentation, a visual survey of
public sculpture, Francis and Koshock were able to initiate activities intended to engage the children in collaborative behaviors. The children were taken on-site and directed to collect natural objects and found materials for an environmental sculpture. As the children returned to the gathering site with their materials, it became apparent that no one child had gathered enough objects to create a credible sculpture. In order to construct a sculpture, combining objects would be necessary. Excited by intriguing materials found by others, including curls of dried clay, stalks of hollyhock, small quartz stones, bark, and blackberry branches, several children began spontaneous negotiations with one another. Eventually five sculptural pieces were produced by small groups of children. Francis and Koshock then guided the children through critiques of the works, modeling appreciative examination of the group-made constructions and of individual decisions that contributed to the overall success of each piece.

**Coalescing a Community**

The last of the four professional workshop presenters arrived ill prepared and demonstrably reluctant to speak with children. His condescending demeanor towards both the children and their instructors suggested that he had little confidence in their ability to grasp the complex concepts of water drainage well enough to make relevant decisions about its effect on park design. Thus, the presenter inadvertently established an adversarial environment that placed the instructors and students together on one side and he on the other. Sensing this alliance, leaders began emerging from the group of youngsters. These leaders also began functioning as liaisons between their peers and the instructors.

When the last of the professional presentations was completed, Francis and Koshock held a small ceremony during which they conveyed the title of "Junior Park Experts" upon the workshop participants. The ceremony was intended to imbue the children with a sense of group identity and validate their potential abilities to solve problems of park design. Thereafter the activities would involve children in alternating group brainstorming, individual endeavors, and group decisions about design. These would culminate in a final collaborative effort. For example, the children were directed to examine photographs they had taken of the proposed site and during tours of three other city parks. They were then to draw their own interpretations of these features on butcher paper murals. As in the photographs taken during the 1999 summer program, it was evident that the most popularly photographed features were human features. This human aesthetic was also evident in the important physical features selected. The most popularly represented or selected feature was a water feature, either as a stream with a waterfall shaded by trees or as a flowing fountain. This was chosen because it was recognized as a quiet place where members of the community might "get away from the city" for awhile and sit quietly communing with nature, or because it might be a place where people could "walk with a friend." The second most popularly selected feature was the idea of a memorial or marker to members of the community who had succumbed to violence. A local artist had created a memorial for this purpose, in the form of a wall painting, on the original park site. The children felt strongly that this should be preserved, enhanced, or recreated for the new park. A gazebo or sheltered place where people could sit and talk, hold picnics, or gatherings, was the third most popular feature. This was followed by desire for a sculpture as part of the entrance or placed in a prominently visible area with the purpose of marking the park as community unique.

Aside from identifying particular features as important, during this group discussion it became clear that the children were now thinking beyond their own preferences to consider others that might be using the park. They were beginning to envision a community-
friendly area where mothers could supervise young children playing on a safe playground, where vegetable gardens, laid out for elderly persons to tend, might be placed close to the entrance for easy access. Bike and jogging trails, structures for storing athletic equipment, and ball playing fields were listed, although these were low on the preference scale, and some athletic features, like tennis courts, common to some community parks, were not considered relevant to the needs of this community.

During another activity, the children individually created symbols for each of preferred features identified during previous investigations. Symbols were to be used as legends for a working blueprint of the park design. Individually created designs were then shared with the group and children voted on the most articulate and visually successful motif for each feature (e.g. bench, gazebo, tree, restroom, etc.). The children were now making critical decisions based on real design issues and were leaving personal egos and issues behind as they focused on the important design problem of communicating clearly through visual symbols.

Next, each child was given photocopied sheets of the symbols, which he or she cut out and arranged on individual blueprints. The features were connected with trails, grass, flowers, or trees, added in crayon. Another selection process followed, during which two blueprint submissions were chosen as most successful. The large group was then divided into two smaller groups, each of whom was given one of the chosen blueprints for revision, refinement, and working into a small scale drawing. These refinements were again submitted for large group consideration, and a final blueprint was agreed upon as a plan for the topographical model.

**A Communal Design**

By this time, clear leaders had emerged, but the children also were seeing themselves as a cohesive unit. The input of every child was being respected and valued. The combination of individual and group effort provided a kind of rhythmic energy. While critique comments and selection of their ideas and designs were validating the efforts of some children, the efforts of all the members of the group were being validated because each child had some skill (i.e. leader, drawer, thinker, or maker) that benefited the whole. This valuing was exemplified, for example, by the accommodations voluntarily made for a rambunctious hyperactive child because, after all, he was “part of our group.” Every child was coming to be invested in the plan and to own a piece of the making process.

The finale to the workshop, a 6' x 10' topographical model, was carved, using clay tools, from floral foam glued to ten 2' x 3' sections of plywood. Here the different abilities of the children came into full account. Younger or less skilled children dyed and wrapped wire around sprigs of baby's breath for flowers. Other children applied cellophane to a depressed area in order to simulate a water retention pond. Balsa wood was cut and glued to make a footbridge. Moss, wire, sand, coffee grounds, little boxes and garden materials were molded or applied to create other features dictated by the blueprint.

**Conclusion and a Concluding Caveat**

At a joint ceremony marking the completion of the Summer Arts Program and a groundbreaking for one of the Hope VI funded housing units, the children presented their completed model and received certificates of achievement. Attending city officials and representatives of the project-sponsoring organizations were clearly impressed by the quality of the design and crafting of the completed model. The children, who were already demonstrably pleased with themselves for having
accomplished the project goals, now found themselves spotlighted by praise and were eager to talk about and explain what they had done. This event served as the validating capstone of the children's achievement. The initial self-centered concerns of the children and of the participating organizations gave way to a sense of individual and group pride. While the children basked in light of the public praise, members of the contributing organizations felt its reflective glow.

There is a caveat here. Throughout the nation, HOPE VI initiatives have been criticized for offering only token social solutions to complex social ills. Although originally hailed as "a tremendously exciting program of profound and historical importance in the revitalization of cities," many critics see this as a too optimistic, too ambitious, or even disingenuous claim (Pitoff, 1999). The purpose of the Summer Arts Program, as publicly advertised by officials of the RRHA (1999a) and its supportive agencies, was to imbue residents of Blackwell with pride and a sense of ownership in their renovated neighborhood. This goal is further alluded in the proposed 2001 Blackwell Summer Arts Program, which calls for Blackwell children and adults to participate in the construction of some feature of the park (e.g., flower gardens, a sculptural entranceway, etc.). Indeed, it has been suggested that children who are involved in personally relevant community experiences become invested in the community and are inspired to beneficially contribute to that community as adults (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Yet, in reality, it is not clear how many of these displaced children and their families will be able return to Blackwell. Certainly more housing units were destroyed than are being rebuilt. Unofficially, the workshops provide a humane façade for a bureaucratic decision to displace many of the poorer original residents and replace them with more financially affluent families. Of whom will the Blackwell Community then be comprised and who will benefit from the design and construction contributions of these children?

These are issues that trouble the VCU supervisors and instructors of the Blackwell Summer Arts Program. Yet, as educators, we are admonished to design lesson objectives that, while they should be challenging, must also be attainable. The goals of this workshop series, as envisioned by Dr. Bleick, Francis, Koshock, and me, were, first to engage youngsters in the plan and design of a park and second to help students understand how features of a well functioning community develop. Both of these objectives were met. The program set the stage for the young participants to experience a "democratic" community (Lakes, 1995) through shared decision making, group motivation, self-esteem, and the agenda setting opportunities of collaborative teamwork. This was particularly significant in that the children demonstrated an understanding of the human element as the most significant feature of community. The youngsters were then engaged in activities that led them to recognize the importance of sharing and valuing individual contributions in order to create a community of designers. It is hoped that the community-designing skills demonstrated by these youngsters may serve them well in whatever neighborhood they find themselves living in the future. If so, this will have been a most successful result of the Blackwell Summer Arts Program.

References


Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority. (1999b). First group of Blackwell residents step out for Self-Sufficiency Training Program. The Hope VI Newsletter, 7, 1, 3.