

# CUP

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## BACKGROUND

The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) is a New York City-based non-profit organisation that uses design and art to increase the impact of public participation in shaping the city. They inscribe their work in the tradition of community design centers in the U.S., which work with communities in order to raise debates and engage in discussion about urban planning. CUP develops this tradition further by taking an approach of ‘popular education’, in which they use design tools to further their mission of improving public participation in shaping the places where we all live.

To do so, they bring together art and design professionals—artists, graphic designers, architects, urban planners—with community-based advocates and researchers—organisers, government officials, academics, service-providers and policymakers—to work on communication projects. The aim of these projects is to break down the complex systems that shape urban life and to create educational tools that help to make these systems understandable to more people.

CUP’s engagement in making the world around us more legible is driven by the belief in the practice of democracy: citizens should be involved in imagining their surroundings. Learning how to investigate enables citizens to interact with and change what they see.

## AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

Currently, the organisation works in two program areas: Community Education and Youth Education. Both aim at making important policy issues accessible for the people who need to know.

Under Community Education, the Envisioning Development Toolkits are projects that teach people about basic land-use terms and concepts in order to enable them to participate meaningfully in neighborhood change. These toolkits are developed over long periods of researching and testing to make sure they really facilitate the access to the processes of urban planning.

Also under Community Education, the Making Policy Public series facilitates close collaboration between policy experts and design professionals to produce fold-out posters that make complex policy issues accessible and appealing.

In its Youth Education programs, CUP partners with schools and afterschool programs to produce experiential, project-based curricula that get students out of the

classroom to investigate the city and the people. The most in-depth projects in collaboration with the students are generally developed by working with them an average of 3 hours a week over the period of 15 weeks.

## FUNDING

The work of CUP in its current form is funded through grants from foundations invested in youth development, community development, civic engagement, and art and design, as well as contracts for specific projects as well as through the support of private donors. Private donations, small and big, are crucial for keeping the organisation running by covering its bread-and-butter activities.

## DEVELOPMENT

1997: first project

2001: registers as a non-profit organisation

2005: hires its first fulltime staff member

2011: 4 full-time staff members; \$500,000 budget

## LOCATION

New York, 8,175,133 inhabitants

## CONVERSATION

This conversation with Damon Rich, the founder of CUP and Chair of the Board of Directors, has been held in April 2011 via phone following up his presentation at the Architecture Foundation (London) in February 2011.

**Bianca Elzenbaumer: When you started out in 1997 with what would become CUP, you had no clients built into your projects. How did you finance the projects back then and how did you make your own ends meet?**

**Damon Rich:** Starting out in the early days, there was the wish to design things for which there wasn’t a ready market, but I didn’t want to be put off by the lack of it. Back then some of my collaborators were still in school, some people had jobs, and we would do a big project every year. In this sense, it really started out with what were more like the normal projects that young designers would do on their own: a competition entry, a little publication or something like that.

So very much all the early projects that led into CUP where these self-initiated, personal enrichment things, which you do because you want to make things that you think are interesting.

In terms of how I made ends meet, the answer is simply 'other jobs'. I was doing freelance teaching for another organisation and was working in a couple of different architecture offices. So there certainly was a long transition from that precarious economic model to actually being paid by CUP. And even when I was able to work more full-time on CUP, I still had to have some other jobs to get along well.

**Bianca:** As the coming into being of CUP as a non-profit organisation has been a long transition, could you trace this development for us?

**Damon:** For a long time after we started, we did not have any overhead and all our work was project-based: whatever money we could get for a project, we would spend it on that project. But we also found workarounds to support our practice, I set up our first studio space for free by doing a private architectural project for someone in exchange for a space in their warehouse. This way of operating allowed CUP not to face monthly bills for \$10,000 for paying staff and office space and it gave us a lot of freedom to experiment as well as to make slower changes.

As CUP grew, the question came up of what the model for this practice should be. Should it be more like a firm, where there is me and people who work for me, where it is my design vision and everything looks the same? Being the main designer for it all was fine for a lot of years, but at some point it made sense that the model for this practice should be a non-profit, with a core staff and all other people who plug into it in different ways.

Besides this structural decision, surely one of the biggest changes in the model for CUP was beginning to have clients as part of the projects from the very beginning—which is something that happened around 2003/2004. And I guess that this is where I would like to respond to people who tell you that 'you need to comply with the market', that there are many markets. Certainly, you need a financial plan for something to be sustainable but that doesn't mean that just because you are an architect you need to go out there and to find rich people to design their houses. Today for instance we have more schools coming to us than we are actually able to service. We have more community-based organisation coming to us that we are able to deal with.

This current overload of requests means that we are now needing to start up a long-term planning process in which the biggest question to be addressed for the future is if we are actually trying to address the

demand that we now see in terms of people coming to us saying 'we would love to have you for this or that'. What is our answer to this question? At the moment we don't really have one.

**Bianca:** In your talk at the Architecture Foundation, you mentioned that the budget of CUP has been growing very slowly and that at the beginning you went through the very time consuming process of seeking support for individual projects, until you developed a more sustainable strategy that secures funding for project programs that serve as an umbrella under which single initiatives can fit. Could you tell us more about this evolution in funding that you went through?

**Damon:** In terms of budget we have been continuously growing at a rate of about 30-40% every year. In the early years we also had periods when the budget would double from \$60,000 to \$120,000. This year we have 500,000\$ in terms of money that goes to CUP, which makes us really proud. This slow rate of growth has been a real luxury for the organisation, because with a fast rate of growth comes the risk of making bad decisions.

The fact that in the early years everyone involved had their jobs and that no one was depending on CUP to pay their rent gave us the possibility of growing slowly and being quite thoughtful about how things went. Today it is of course a little bit different, we have four people working full-time, who fully depend on the organisation and we have a lot more overhead in terms of rent, salaries for freelance collaborators and things like that. If something went wrong at the beginning, we said "oh, whatever, it did not work out", but now it has major impacts on people's lives.

Since then things have changed, although our staff is still paid less than what they should be for the things they do—but they are paid much more reasonable salaries now than ever before and have their health insurance covered by CUP, which is really great—but it also means that we need to have many more financial mechanisms in place in terms of monitoring and reporting, because there is more money coming through and there are more people involved.

Even though there were certain benefits to having low overhead for so long, the fact is that if our mission really is to get a lot of people involved, then doing this in a situation where you are paying people a reasonable amount leads not only to better work, but is also necessary to make the organisation sustainable. As much as we might think—and this is just my opinion—

that people's good intentions, extra time and volunteering time can make all kinds of good things happen, the fact is that institutions can stand up for decades and decades because people are getting paid, it is their real job. This was the reason for which we felt strongly about moving away from the low overhead model.

**Bianca: You underline the importance of CUP being a non-profit organisation. Could you tell us more what the implications of this form of organisation are?**

**Damon:** As a non-profit organisation, the bottom line is that you have a board of directors, who don't get paid but who are ultimately responsible for the well-being of the organisation. Being a 'Nonprofit' also means that the organisation has a mission—and some people say that the mission of the organisation is really its owner—because the primary responsibility of the board of directors is to make sure that the organisation sticks to its mission. So when people come to us with a project proposal, we have a checklist with questions we ask about each project to figure out if it indeed fits our mission.

Now, of course sometimes you might have ten projects that meet your mission, but only two that are fun and then it is a question of prioritising. But generally the biggest question is 'is this project really furthering our mission?'

The board of directors meets four times a year and its members sit on smaller meetings more frequently. The fact that a board of directors is all volunteer and not in an organisation's office every day can create tension between staff members and the board dynamics—which luckily is not our case—where the main staff can understandably say "who are these board people? Why are they having so much authority? They are not here everyday. We are here every day." I have come to appreciate only recently the inbuilt check and balance that comes with this model: the board really has to look at the big picture, has to think in the 'long-term' and needs to keep this on the forefront, while the staff are usually worried about the deadline that is tomorrow, getting through a project and daily admin. This inbuilt difference of perspective helps to make the organisation healthier.

**Bianca: So it is really the mission statement as well as the structure of the non-profit that is keeping you on track, making sure you are not taking on projects just for the money or the fame involved?**

**Damon:** Yes, and it has been a very long time to develop that. When you say mission, this all becomes very much consultant speech, but generally first you have a vision of how you would like the world to be different: at CUP we would like everyone to have access to the tools to engage with real estate developers, architects and other policy makers about the decisions that affect their neighbourhood.

This vision is usually bigger than what you can really do in a short time, but ideally—if for instance everything goes right with our organisation—in 50 years New York City will be very different in the way it makes decisions around development.

The importance of the vision also means that when a project is done we need to evaluate it, in order to see if it has brought us closer to our goal or if that project was a failure and we should avoid doing something similar again.

**Bianca: By now you have accompanied CUP for 14 years. What influence did the organisation have on your social life and your own design practice?**

**Damon:** In the early years it was very difficult to separate my work from my social life. As the founder my life was fully intertwined with the life of the organisation. Reconsidering my situation now—if I would need to do it all over again—I might try to keep more of a separation between my work for exhibitions as a designer and the work I did with CUP, as today people don't think of me as the designer of all that 'stuff', but as running an organisation. I am happy about that, but what I love in the world is designing. For better or for worse, and again I don't have any real complaints, a lot of my early work was labelled as CUP in an anonymous way—however that's just what it is.

In the end, to detach the work of CUP from any specific personality was part of the reason for making it a non-profit—to make it something that could get up and walk on its own. Sometimes I certainly have mixed feelings about that, because when you are a designer you have a feeling that certain things should be done in certain ways, so when different people get involved and they have different ideas, you first can think "ugh, this is ruining everything." In the end, I'm really happy with the way it has gone and the way CUP challenges the idea of individual authorship held by the design world.

Pulling back from an organisation you have set up can be very difficult, but there comes the moment that you might not be the right person for the job any longer. After the early deep involvement of the founder, that

person can find it difficult to step away, can keep on micro-managing, and will eventually hurt the organisation. In our case we are trying to avoid this 'founderitis' by my gradually shifting roles with CUP, which I think is working well as with the help of others I am able to extricate myself from my own deep involvement.

**Bianca: Now that you are pulling back somewhat from CUP and have taken on the position of Urban Designer for the City of Newark, New Jersey, what are the new challenges you embrace?**

**Damon:** My personal story is that CUP was really fantastic and I got to do and learn many things, but even though at CUP we are immensely proud of having a \$500,000 budget, it is still very small. It is micro.

In this sense, what was exciting to me about coming to Newark as its first urban designer was the possibility to test out the things I learned at CUP on a bigger scale. Some things have gone pretty well on a small scale, so now what can survive at a bigger scale? That is my current experiment.

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