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Buckeye Village Community Center—Columbus, Ohio

Kay Bea Jones, The Ohio State University



Imagine a village community comprised of shared back yards and common play areas, small homes laid out to fit the meager budgets and varied needs of single mothers—all designed to the specifications of those who would live there. Now imagine that such a grand experiment in co-housing would be located just off the Ohio State University campus, in a section of Columbus not known for innovative housing, where it would provide a much-needed resource for students with a tenuous hold on their college careers.

This was the original vision for Buckeye Village, a university-sponsored student-family housing project, whose community center was the winner of a 2006 EDRA/*Places* award for Design. The most ambitious of the co-housing-

inspired ideals for a new off-campus village never materialized. Instead, older student-family housing was adapted and redesigned to provide living facilities. But the new community center at the heart of this repurposed enclave now provides a joyful and dignified location for a cluster of shared facilities that express much of the essence of that vision.

On a site originally developed to provide housing for married World War II veterans returning to the university, Buckeye Village maintains an important connection to the past. But it also updates the university's mission to assist students with families. Reflecting changes in enrollment, many such families today are headed by single mothers, and research shows that without organized support, it is very difficult for them to complete their education and move up the socioeconomic ladder.

Opened in January 2005, the community center includes space for nine classrooms, a daycare center, an art studio, a family room, meeting space, an exercise room, and a community garden. Glazed classroom windows open

Above: The interior spaces of the Buckeye Village Community Center reassert an older commitment by the university to student-family life. Floor-to-ceiling glazing draws natural light through classrooms to the main corridor and provides a strong visual connection to adjacent outdoor play areas. Photo by Brad Feinknopf.

directly onto age-specific playscapes that are isolated from car entrances and parking areas. Meanwhile, child-scaled openings allow even mundane parts of the building to be transformed into spaces for play and exploration.

“We really came at it from the standpoint of trying to provide places for the families to come together, and make it visually a community,” says Kay Bea Jones a Professor at OSU’s Knowlton School of Architecture and principal designer for the project. “People have been, and are, living that way. This type of community building just makes it easier.”

A Fight for the Past

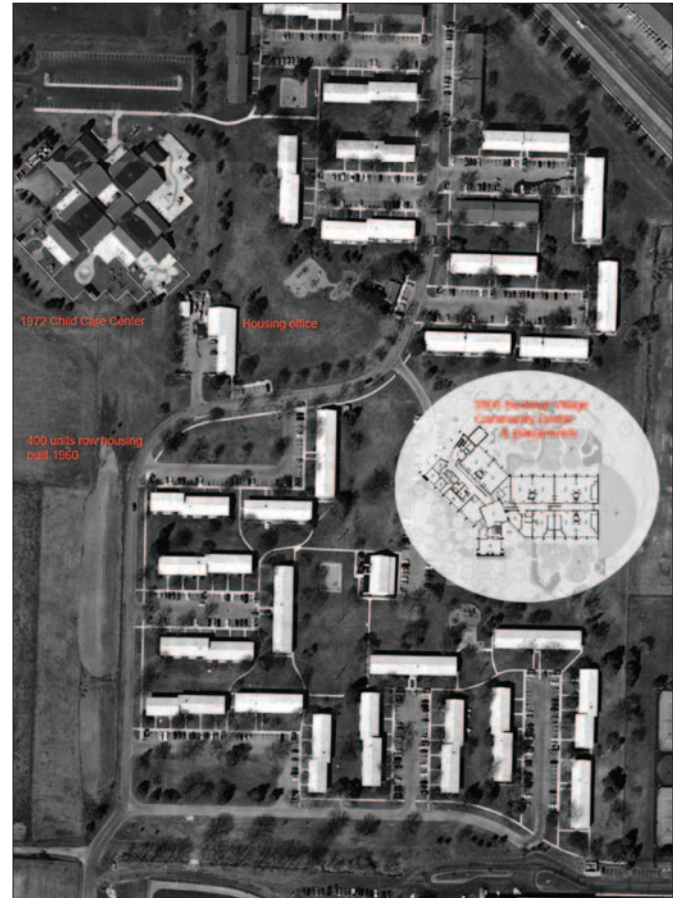
As a bright and nurturing place for childcare, tutoring, group activities, and counseling services, the community center is a distinguished design in its own right. But what really attracted jurors to the project was the compelling story behind it.

The idea for Buckeye Village originated in 1996 when Dr. Beverley Toomey, a Professor of Social Work at OSU, and Jones, paired up on a collaborative teaching grant. One poll that they conducted during their research showed that more than 350 low-income single-parent students would be eligible for a program aimed at keeping them in school. Toomey and Jones began looking around the country for an institution that might serve as a model for a program that might provide housing and support services to this at-risk group. But they came up almost empty-handed.

“The students who come to the university today are not necessarily the same ones the campus was designed for,” Toomey said in an interview with the *Nontraditional Students Report*. Indeed, some are young mothers, frequently of color, whose child-rearing responsibilities and life needs frequently conflict with academic obligations. However, Toomey believes the university has a special obligation to serve this group. “If we don’t educate [them], many will be doomed to poverty,” she said.

Jones and Toomey enlisted the help of several other university departments in an effort to understand and provide for these students. Among them were the Offices of Student Affairs, Human Resources, and Minority Affairs, as well as the Colleges of Social Work and Engineering/Architecture. Another key player became OSU’s ten-year-old ACCESS program, “an academic and social support program to assist low-income, minority, single-parent students who are pursuing a college education.”

As ideas for the physical and social character of a potential co-housing project began to take more concrete form, the university was deciding to help resolve some of the



problems of crime and physical decay in areas adjacent to campus. It was at this time that they began the south campus Gateway program, a mixture of stores, entertainment and housing. In collaboration with the City of Columbus, the university had also developed a master redevelopment strategy for a 51-acre swath of land next to the Olentangy River that included plans for commercial development, the connection of a series of park areas into a greenbelt, and a set of expanded recreational and sports facilities. That redevelopment plan, however, also called for demolition of a working childcare facility and an area of preexisting student-family housing with associated gardens and playgrounds.

After months of research and planning, Jones and Toomey’s plan to build a co-housing development for

Above: The community center is located amid a rehabilitated cluster of student-family residences. Site plan by Kay Bea Jones and Acock Architects.



single-mother students hit a snag. They had tried and eliminated several sites for their proposed project. They had looked at the Gateway area of campus, then decided that it was too crowded with rowdy undergraduates. They explored an area within one of the most densely populated sections of Columbus that had been cleared for an electrical substation, and eliminated that too.

The last remaining option was a section of the Olentangy redevelopment area, most of which had already been claimed for wetland restoration or for the construction of new sports facilities.

Above: On the exterior, the design of the Community Center expresses the different qualities of its interior areas. The use of brick ties the building to the surrounding neighborhood of two-story student residences.

Inset: The bright, playful interior court at the center of the building is known as its “lighthouse.” Photos by Brad Feinknopf.

Against All Odds

The site where the Buckeye Village now stands was originally a parcel of farmland donated to the university. Located across the Olentangy River from the OSU football stadium, it had been used for student-family housing since the years after World War II, when returning veterans going to college on the GI Bill had first created the need for such a housing option.

Even though the housing looked worn-out and substandard by 2000, its barrack-like complexes had originally been considered adequate. They were small and functional, and they included nearby “victory” gardens for use by the student families. In the intervening half century, the faces of the residents at the complex had changed significantly, but the physical structures and layout had not.

With the demise of their original plan for an off-campus project, Jones and her team successfully convinced university leaders that transforming these structures for a new generation of student families would be a more valuable

use of the site than constructing new athletic facilities.

Working largely behind the scenes to avoid the need for a state appropriation, Buckeye Village advocates then quickly crafted a finance plan that would allow rehabilitation of the existing housing and other facilities, subsidized rent for approximately fifty new target families, and construction of a new 28,000-sq.ft. community center.

The advocacy campaign included black-and-white photographs from the 1940s and 1950s showing the site as a complex of newly constructed residences. Advocates also dug through the university archives for images of past residents. One collage showed pictures of bobby-sock-clad women with perfectly curled tresses digging in their victory gardens. Another showed snapshots of today's residents, a global village of smiling international students and their families.

Finally, they brought testimonials from a new generation of intended residents—mostly poor, African American single mothers, many of whom would likely not finish their programs at the university without the support Buckeye Village would provide.

Participatory Design at Its Best

A distinguishing element of an EDRA/*Places* Design Award winner is its ability to demonstrate how it benefits from a specific program of research. In preparing their original co-housing scheme, the team spent countless hours consulting with women in the ACCESS program on how best to design their living spaces to be functional yet flexible, and how to create outdoor spaces that were at once communal and private. Considerable effort also went into documenting how a supporting environment might break the cycle of poverty these students and their children might rejoin if they dropped out.

When Jones decided to adopt the site's preexisting housing, the Buckeye Village Project risked losing the benefit of this valuable research. But as the project progressed through design and into construction, Jones and her architectural team found they could incorporate many of the women's concerns into the design of the community center.

In a postoccupancy survey, residents today give high marks to the new centerpiece of their community. They mention the wide hallways and clear floor-to-ceiling windows which visually connect the indoor childcare rooms to outdoor play areas. They note the aesthetic appeal of its comfortable, decorated family room, atrium, and secluded second story. Above all, they appreciate the many nooks that children find to hide and frolic in.

"College studies are demanding, and scheduling classes, studying for tests, and writing papers can be especially difficult for students who are also single parents and living on a low income," said Ohio State President Karen Holbrook at a 2003 groundbreaking for the community center. The Buckeye Village community center, "is a sound investment in their future and our community."

—*Catriona Stuart*

Sample Juror Comments—Buckeye Village

Ahrentzen: Of the ones we looked at this is just the most compelling story.

Hull: It's a really meaty program.

Ahrentzen: And they put the childcare and community center right next to the existing housing.

Hull: The support for single mothers—that is really strong too.

Ahrentzen: There was also a considerable amount of research that went into this, including a design workshop with the single mothers that was part of their original cohousing idea.

Jones: I think this is all impressive research, especially the workshops with the women.

Kelbaugh: It certainly deserves it based on social merit and program content.

McNally: They didn't really cast it that way, but the story is incredible. They've been hanging in there for nine years. They find outside funding. They fend off the athletic department of Ohio State—that's an amazing thing, in itself.

Ahrentzen: There are very few universities that target housing for low-income single parents.

Kelbaugh: It certainly does raise the bar.

McNally: Can we say it was not the physical design that was most important, but the idea.

Hull: We should really hit that hard. We really liked the program.