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# **Engaging Students in Transforming Their Built Environment via Y-PLAN: Lessons from Richmond, California**

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## **Abstract**

*This field report describes how high school students from Richmond, California used an innovative educational strategy called Y-PLAN (Youth – Plan, Learn, Act, Now) to actively participate in the planning and transformation of their school, neighborhoods and city. Our description follows students through the five-step Y-PLAN process, highlighting how they effectively challenged the ways in which unhealthy environments and adult-oriented urban planning and policy making structure disadvantage and undermine trajectories of opportunity. In doing so, the report illustrates how Y-PLAN can equip young people from low-income communities with the tools they need to become agents of positive change, and informs a discussion for planners and educators of the essential conditions that structure that agency.*

**Keywords:** participatory planning, place-conscious education, youth participation

## Introduction

Place profoundly impacts young people's opportunities and life chances (Briggs 2005). Even so, children and youth, and especially low-income youth of color, are rarely invited to sit at the urban planning and policy-making table (Simpson 1997; Kemp and Sutton 2011). The result is plans, policies and built environments that largely overlook the needs, insights and potential of some of our cities' most important constituents.

The University of California Berkeley's Y-PLAN (Youth – Plan, Learn, Act, Now) is an educational methodology designed to challenge the status quo. This innovative program invites children and youth to participate alongside professional planners and other adults in efforts aimed at transforming policy landscapes and built environments. Over the past decade, Y-PLAN has engaged over 12,000 young people in over 75 community development projects across 16 cities in the United States, Japan, China and Sub-Saharan Africa.

This work has produced a growing body of action-research that demonstrates Y-PLAN's potential for delivering positive outcomes for students as well as communities. Results to date show that Y-PLAN builds young peoples' knowledge and skills for college, career, and citizenship while creating healthy, sustainable communities (McKoy and Vincent 2007; Stewart 2012); moreover, it builds their capacity to contribute insights into planning and policy-making and enhances civic leaders' ability to value and use youth insight to create better plans, policies, and places (McKoy, Buss and Stewart 2014).

This field report contributes to this work by offering a detailed description of one community's five-year engagement with Y-PLAN. Richmond, California is a city that reflects many of the same harsh realities found across the nation, with disinvested industrial cities seeking to improve local and citywide conditions through innovative redevelopment strategies. The experience of Richmond High School students shows how Y-PLAN effectively mobilizes and harnesses the energy and insights of young people to their own benefit and the benefit of the entire community.

The report aims to bring Y-PLAN to life and to answer the why, what and how of engaging young people in urban planning and design.

## Y-PLAN (Youth – Plan, Learn, Act, Now)

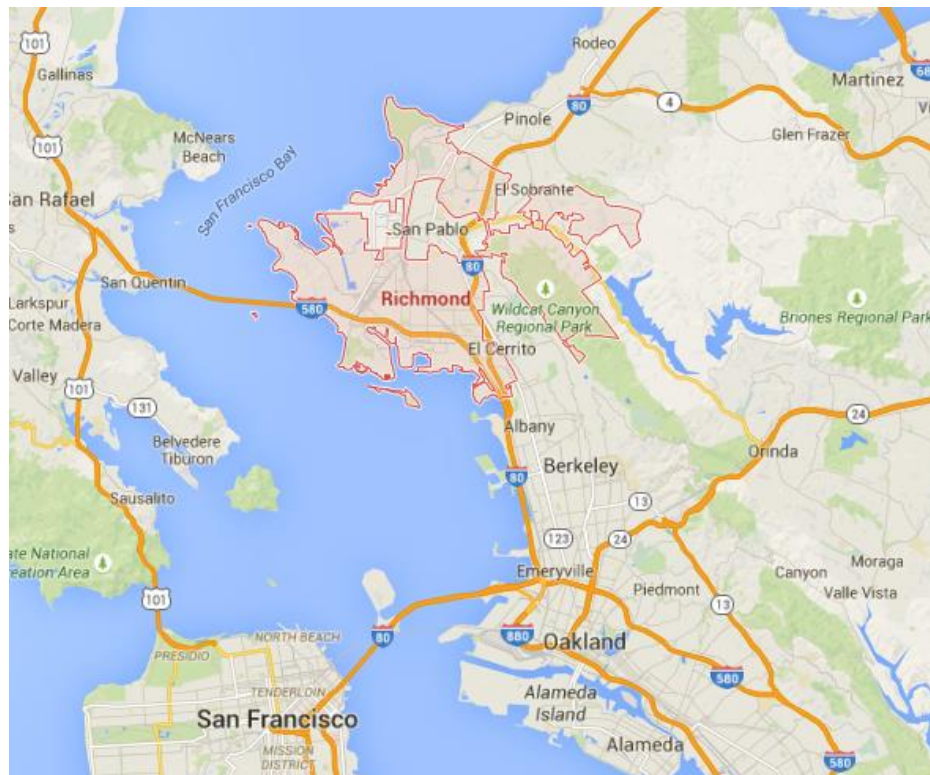
The fundamental idea behind Y-PLAN is to better align place-making and learning. Learning is not simply conceived of as the product of teaching but as a vital process that is inseparable from the roles and activities making up a given community. When learning is conceived as a function of access to the full range of a community's resources, people and places are put in process and subject to being made, remade and transformed together.

## Richmond, California

Many people have said that the City of Richmond is undergoing a "renaissance." Located 16 miles from San Francisco (Figure 1), its neighboring cities have some of the most robust economies in the Bay Area. Once home to WWII-era shipbuilding

operations, Richmond has struggled in the shadow of its post-war industrial legacy, experiencing underperforming schools and a workforce struggling to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy.

**Figure 1. Located directly across the bay from San Francisco, Richmond is home to 32 miles of shoreline, and some of the most beautiful natural features in the Bay Area. However, transportation and accessibility barriers prevent many Richmond residents from accessing these local amenities.**



In 2012, Richmond was awarded a grant from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments to create the South Shoreline Specific Plan. The plan focuses on taking advantage of the planned Global Campus at Richmond Bay, planned ferry service to San Francisco, and other assets, to create a sustainable South Shoreline district. However, the area has long been socially and physically separated from the rest of the Richmond by freeways and railroad tracks and does not reflect the diverse demographics of the city overall and the local schools. To change the status quo, Richmond is working across sectors, including with local schools, to improve the city's physical and social infrastructure and to ensure all Richmond residents benefit from the opportunity and investment on the horizon. This requires planning for and *with* young people. As Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay explained, "We don't want youth today lost in the vision for tomorrow. We want to change in a way that's smart and responsive to future

needs. We want students to be invested in this community so they come back after college to make this a better place.”

The City of Richmond partnered with the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) to utilize the Y-PLAN methodology to engage Richmond High School students in South Shoreline research and development (Figure 2). We describe students’ work through the Y-PLAN 5-Phase Roadmap.

**Figure 2. Y-PLAN students at Richmond High School stop for a picture at the Rosie the Riveter Memorial on their site visit to the Richmond South Shoreline**



### **Y-PLAN in Action: Richmond’s South Shoreline Redevelopment Plan**

*We are presenting because, as Richmond’s youth, we should have a say in this important issue. Since we are affected by the problem, we believe we should be part of the solution.*

—Richmond high school student, final Y-PLAN presentation, May 2013

The recognition that youth care deeply and hold “simple but powerful insights” about the places where they live has fueled a five-year partnership between the City of Richmond, Richmond High School, and CC+S to bring the Y-PLAN methodology into local high schools. Since 2010, the initiative has brought together city, educational, and community partners to work on more than ten community development projects. Over 500 low-income youth in Richmond have participated in Y-PLAN, recognizing their critical role in place-making and urban transformation. Over 30 city leaders and staff have learned how and why to engage young people in civic processes. Here we focus on a two-year project at Richmond High School, focused on the South Shoreline Redevelopment Plan.



The following description follows the students as they work through the five phase Y-PLAN Roadmap (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Y-PLAN Five-Phase Roadmap of Inquiry**



### Phase 1: Start Up + Project Identification

Y-PLAN projects align with academic goals and standards in high school and equip students with critical thinking, teamwork, and community readiness. Y-PLAN was adopted as part of the curriculum by the Richmond High Health Academy, a small learning community focused on providing students with integrated curriculum and linking classroom work to the world outside. Teachers at Richmond High facilitate active learning across the curriculum in science, English, and social studies to create policy and design solutions around the authentic project question presented by the Richmond City Manager.

Richmond High School students worked with a “client”—the Richmond City Manager as well as city staff, educators, community partners, and professional planners to generate proposals for the following questions:

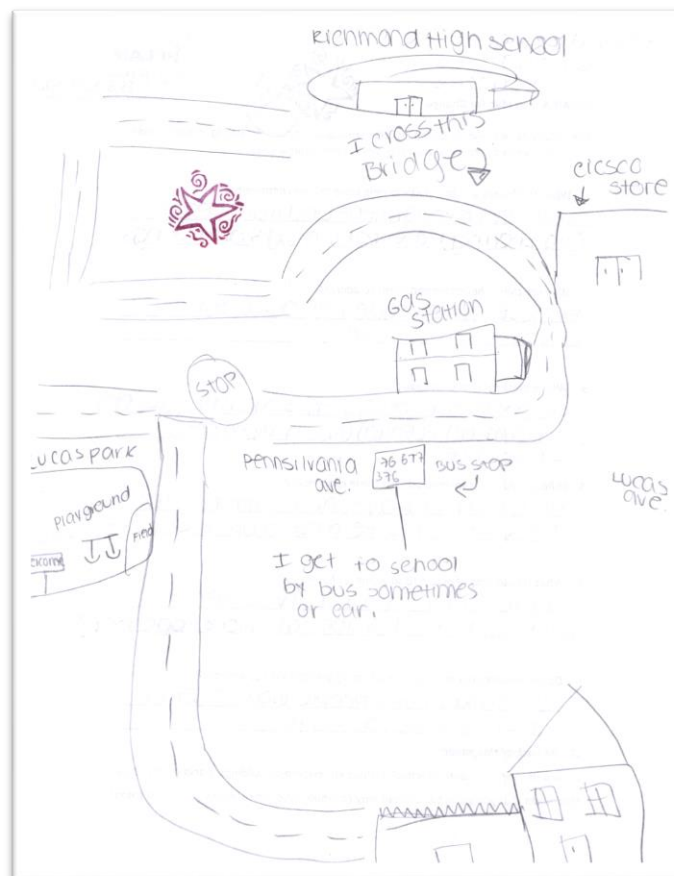
- What kinds of transportation improvements would make for easier and safer access to the south shoreline?
- How can the City improve education and employment opportunities for all residents at the Global Campus?

### Phase 2: Making Sense of the City

*I am a different learner because when I go outside, I look at things or empty areas and see how I can make it better.*

—Y-PLAN student, Richmond High School

**Figure 4. To begin the process of thinking critically about their environment, Richmond Y-PLAN students drew “mind maps” of their route to and from school, prior to site mapping.**



Once a question has been posed, Y-PLAN students venture outside the classroom and map the school and neighborhood to gather data necessary to address their project question. In Y-PLAN, students examine community issues through the lens of the built environment: housing, transportation, public space, and schools, services and amenities. Students begin to think critically about their observations, and develop other possible avenues of inquiry.

Richmond High students mapped the school campus, surrounding community and larger areas of the city targeted for this project (Figure 5). Students conducted interviews, and created, distributed and analyzed more than 600 community surveys to understand transportation issues (Figure 6). Students discovered new ways to solve community issues through built environment strategies. As students learned the history of their community, they discovered that buildings and spaces do not just “happen,” but are designed by people with visions and values.

**Figure 5. Richmond High School students map assets and challenges along the Richmond South Shoreline. For many students, it was the first time they had been to this part of Richmond.**



**Figure 6. Y-PLAN students at Richmond High School conducted community research, including creating, distributing, and analyzing over 600 community surveys to better understand transportation issues.**

**South Richmond Transportation Plan Community Survey**

**3. How do you most often get around Richmond?**

☐ By car

☐ By bus

☐ By bicycle

☐ By walking

Other (please specify)

**4. How often do you go to the South Shoreline area? (Check the most accurate response).**

☐ Never

☐ Once a year

☐ A few times a year

☐ Once a month

☐ More than once a month

☐ I live and/or work in the South Shoreline area.

**5. When you travel to the South Shoreline, how do you usually go?**

☐ By car

☐ By bus

☐ By bicycle

☐ By walking

Other (please specify)



**Phase 3: Into Action**

Critical to Y-PLAN's ability to break young people's isolation is the ability to physically take students outside of their isolated communities via busses, rail or walking. Students traveled on a site visit and an "urban inspiration tour" of San Francisco and Berkeley. Students were exposed to new ideas, inspired by new possibilities and committed to bringing lessons home to transform their home communities.

To think critically about the evidence collected, and translate their research into planning and design solutions, the students then worked in small teams in a design charrette with city planning professionals. Students were encouraged to experiment with ideas and eventually create two or three powerful proposals for change.

**Phase 4: Going Public**

*I think the most memorable part of the project was the final presentations. What shocked me the most is that a lot of people took it seriously. That really touched me.*

—Y-PLAN student, Richmond High

Students present their ideas and proposals for change first in their classroom and then in a public arena such as the city council chambers to share with their clients, community stakeholders and parents. Often, Y-PLAN final presentations bring friends, neighbors, and parents to the planning and policymaking table for the first time. Students engage in meaningful dialogue with the planners and policy makers, providing input about the future, and feedback about how the development is working from the students' perspective.

All Richmond High students presented their final proposals publically at Richmond City Hall. The Y-PLAN panel included their client, Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay and other civic and community stakeholders with authority to act on students' ideas (Figure 7). Over 200 residents, parents and community members attended, 70 percent of whom were stepping inside City Hall for the first time.

**Figure 7. Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay, and City Planner Hector Rojas provide feedback and ask questions at Richmond Y-PLAN final presentations.**



### **Young Richmond Planner Perspectives:**

By design, Y-PLAN participants come to recognize and share the wealth of ideas they possess about how their urban community can be more livable, playful, friendly, and sustainable. Here is a sampling of those ideas and how Richmond High students developed them:

#### **1. “We want active, healthy, sustainable places to live, work, and play.”**

Students focused on strategies to improve the social and physical wellbeing of Richmond residents. Core principles included improving pedestrian and bike infrastructure, access to healthy food, and reducing violence:

- Make public transportation more accessible, reliable, and safe
- Create more running trails, bike paths, and sports fields
- Create a mobile farmers market to improve access to healthy food for people in all parts of Richmond

#### **2. “We want to honor our history, diversity, and culture.”**

Students want to lift up the history and culture of their community. This desire was articulated in students’ proposal for a “heroes” wall with MLK and Ghandi to reflect community diversity, and cultural events to attract visitors. They asserted, “We want Richmond to be a place of pride and purpose. Like we’re supposed to be.”

#### **3. “We want vibrant, not isolating, public spaces and physical and social access to opportunity.”**

Students focused on building social and physical pathways to opportunity:

- Access to training, professionals and decision-makers through internships at the planned Global Campus

- Better transportation access to the south shoreline
- A gateway to the South Shoreline Global Campus with creative signage, such as a large panda to symbolize sustainability and community
- Creative events at the South Shoreline that appeal to adults *and* young people

#### **4. “We desire safety, peace, reflection, and quiet.”**

Adults are often surprised to learn youth desire peaceful, calm, natural public space. Students want affordable and efficient transportation, and peaceful public space in which to hang out. As a student explained, “making it easier to get to the South Shoreline would give us an option to relax on the bay, and do homework. I would love to be in beautiful scenery. It would help me focus. It would be silent, and we’d be away from home. All that good stuff.”

#### **5. “We care about business, economic development and want to be prepared to contribute to our community.”**

Concern for businesses and jobs is another key theme. Students want to take advantage of workforce opportunities:

- Create science and health-focused internships to connect Richmond High students to the Global Bay Campus
- Allow access to internships regardless of citizenship status
- Develop businesses at the South Shoreline to employ and attract youth, residents, and visitors

### **Phase 5: Looking Forward – Looking Back**

*We want to get involved and stay involved as change goes on to help improve our city.*

—Richmond High School student, final Y-PLAN presentation

Linking critical reflection to action is at the core of Y-PLAN. At the end of each cycle, students reflect on the Y-PLAN experience and strategize about next steps for their own lives, and the community (Figure 8).

After Y-PLAN projects, many young people ask “what’s next?” and desire to continue their involvement in community change. Impressed with the youths’ professionalism and insight, the City of Richmond has allocated grant funding for Y-PLAN projects and offers several Y-PLAN students internships each year. In addition, the values articulated by Y-PLAN youth are now core principles for city planning in Richmond, resulting in tangible physical changes in the built environment. This is evident in the incorporation of students’ proposals in the building and design of dynamic public space and art, which reflect the values of the users and the diversity of the community. Students also influenced the adoption of improved public transportation services, including availability of shelters, lights, restrooms, maps, and an app for the bus schedule.

**Figure 8. Linking critical reflection to action is a core of Y-PLAN. Richmond High School students reflect on next steps and future action for their project, and their own lives.**



This case study illustrates the Y-PLAN double bottom line: Educators recognize that Y-PLAN and authentic civic engagement is aligned with core academic goals and are a powerful way for students to develop critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and community readiness knowledge and skills. Civic partners are invested in the process as a mechanism for authentic community engagement and similarly recognize Y-PLAN as a key strategy to change the way urban planning professionals and civic leaders think, plan and act. Youth learn to work collaboratively, frame problems, weigh options, appreciate the context within which solutions must work, and communicate their ideas verbally and visually. Youth-driven data that emerge from the work contribute local knowledge and fresh insights about the built environment. As described by these high school students in Richmond, cities designed with and for young people would be peaceful, equitable, artful, and joyful. When given the chance to think creatively about how a city might look and feel, young people are attracted to elements that promote joy and pleasurable exchanges among people and places (Figure 9). They reject any polarized notion of child and adult places—they recognize the reciprocal needs and shared interests among all residents of a city, leading to a far more child- and family-friendly vision of the city.



**Figure 9. When given the chance to think creatively about how a city might look and feel, children and youth desire elements that promote joy and pleasurable exchanges among people and places.**



### **Lessons and Insights**

In this report, we have featured the experience of students at Richmond High School in order to show the positive contributions that young people are able to make when invited to be legitimate participants in authentic efforts to investigate, envision and transform the built environment. This is place-making as learning in action.

We conclude this report by discussing the lessons learned from the Richmond Y-PLAN experience. Together, these lessons present five essential conditions as a framework for effective place-making with young people:

#### **1. An Authentic Project and Client Is Critical**

The authenticity of the project is essential in structuring learning experiences for all participants, and it is what distinguishes Y-PLAN from other forms of project-based or service learning that may be simulations or learning exercises without direct and reciprocal impact between students/schools and their communities.<sup>i</sup> Y-PLAN involves interdependence and power-sharing between youth and adults (Hart 1997), building young people's capacity to contribute insights to decision making. Any Y-PLAN project must have a real "client"—a civic leader with both the desire to listen and the power to act on young people's ideas.

*I never realized before what a barrier I-580 is. Students at Richmond High had never been to the other side of the freeway. All of the things they mentioned—bus shelters, lighting, trash cans,... It's like, 'geez, you're right.' I walked out of there saying 'we've got to get our transportation system going.*



*How can we talk about walkable communities and have a public transit system that is the largest obstacle to that? (Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay).*

The Richmond High projects illustrate participation at the upper rungs of Hart's Ladder, with students engaging as co-researchers with professional planners and other adults on real community development problems. Reciprocity was evident through the City's inclusion of Y-PLAN as an official component of community outreach in the South Richmond Transportation Connectivity Plan. For students, the real-world client and research distinguishes Y-PLAN and builds core college readiness skills. As a student from Richmond High explained, "With Y-PLAN, it's different because we're part of what's going on in the city. We had to work on communicating our vision to our client."

## **2. Place-Making Leads to Powerful and Critical Place-Conscious Learning**

Y-PLAN uses the community as a context for core learning to engage students in critical analysis and action around the social and physical geography of the places where they live. At Richmond High, students discovered new ways to solve community challenges via the built environment. This place-making focus awakens students to a "critical consciousness of place." This pushes students to move beyond the surface to critically and constructively examine and address the often invisible factors that structure inequity and limit access to opportunities within and between places (Gruenewald 2003a).

## **3. Structured Inquiry and Research Process Builds Depth and Quality**

The solution-oriented Y-PLAN methodology is modeled on the participatory planning process and scientific method. Students learn civics by doing civics as they move through the five-phase "Y-PLAN Roadmap" to generate evidence-based solutions for change. We have seen how students conduct community research to support their proposals, including mapping, interviews, and community surveys to gain a sophisticated understanding of complex transportation issues. As the Richmond City Manager explained,

*Y-PLAN is the next level of community engagement. What makes this really different is that there is a lot of research that's going into the work. You're bringing them through an actual planning process. That's different from a normal public process.*

## **4. School-Based Academic Projects Can Align to Community Goals—and Vice Versa**

While school-based, Y-PLAN projects are aligned with academic and community goals. Y-PLAN fits into a broad range of academic courses and organizational structures, positioning youth and schools as critical actors in city transformation and policy-making. At Richmond High, Y-PLAN projects were supported by the district administration as a vehicle to realize educational goals, including preparation for college and career. As a Richmond High instructor explained, Y-PLAN projects provide real-world application of academic skills: "There are several Common Core elements in Y-PLAN that help students analyze and synthesize

information. They are really becoming critical thinkers. They have to come up with a hypothesis and support their ideas with the evidence.” As a result, educators and civic partners come to see Y-PLAN as both meeting a need and helping them do their work better. One Richmond official explained that youth insights are important for decision makers who often live in a more privileged reality than the one experienced by disadvantaged youth. “You can begin to take things for granted because of where you live. It’s eye opening and it shows you a different way and what is not as right as it should be in your own community.”

### **5. Authentic, Place-Conscious Projects Can Offer a “Place at the Table” for Young People to Engage Critically and Constructively in Discussions of Social Justice and Equity**

Y-PLAN projects open avenues of decision-making power to marginalized young people and communities. As such, the projects can be viewed as a method for advancing social justice through a “politics of difference,” advocating for interests based on identity and group difference and acting on place-based inequalities and power relationships (Young 2011). In the words of a Richmond High student,

*We need to have more access to the people who are making the changes. The people from City Hall, they don’t necessarily take the bus, they don’t see what teenagers see when they’re going to and from school. We want to get involved, stay involved as change goes on to improve our city.*

Richmond students also revealed acute perceptions of community issues and were eager to tackle them. They addressed citizenship status, violence, place-based inequality, and health disparities, recommending pathways to internships regardless of citizenship, safer transportation and recreation infrastructure, and access to fresh, local food.

Child- and youth-friendly cities will not simply happen but must be made through intentional interventions in established planning, policymaking, and educational practices using innovative methodologies such as Y-PLAN. The experience of students at Richmond High indicates that students’ active contributions and visions of the city are highly valued by their adult planning and policy-making collaborators. Further, student insights suggest that activating a youth-driven vision of the city may bring us closer to realizing positive community outcomes for everyone—the bottom line when the objective is urban transformation. While the value of youth participation is clear, further research should seek to better quantify and document the “win-win” for cities and schools—the academic and community outcomes of authentic youth engagement over time.

### **Endnote**

- i. The authors would like to clarify why we choose to use the word “authentic” rather than “real-world.” Adults often use the concept of “real world” to refer to everything outside of school or any formal educational environment. While we recognize that much of what happens inside school is too often disconnected from everyday life or “real” practices

outside of school, it is in fact very “real” to the students who must be there and deserve to be recognized as such.

**Deborah L. McKoy** is the Founding Director of the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools and a lecturer in the Departments of City Planning and Education. Her research focuses on the intersection of educational reform and community development and the critical role young people play in urban change and transformation. For over two decades, Deborah’s work has bridged the worlds of research, policy and practice, holding a range of professional positions: Consultant to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Chief of Economic Development at the New York City Housing Authority, and Consultant to the United Nation’s Education For All initiative.

**Jessie Stewart** is Y-PLAN National Director at the Center for Cities + Schools. Jessie’s professional and academic work lies in the intersection of education and community development, with specific interests in school-based youth civic participation in planning, project-based learning, the nexus of planning and education policy, and schools as institutions to engage marginalized communities. Prior to joining the Center Jessie was a high school history teacher in Chicago for five years. As Y-PLAN National Director, Jessie manages Y-PLAN projects and partnerships across the nation and globe, and coordinates the ongoing research initiative to evaluate and document the impact of the Y-PLAN on young people, planning professionals, and communities.

**Shirl Buss** is a designer, educator and urban planner. For more than 25 years, Shirl has worked with children and adults on architectural, interpretive design and community development projects, with a specialty in consensus-based participation in the design process. Shirl holds an M.A. in Human Development from Pacific Oaks College, and an M.Arch. and Ph.D. from UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning. She is an award-winning researcher and educator who has lectured in design and architecture at San Francisco State University, UCLA, UC Berkeley, and California College of the Arts. As an educator and designer Shirl has directed programs, facilitated professional development workshops and taught kindergarten through college students in schools, museums and informal settings including SFMOMA, Headlands Center for the Arts, Zeum, Asian Art Museum, Museum of Children’s Art and Headlands Center for the Arts.

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## Website

**Y-PLAN:** <http://y-plan.berkeley.edu>