

Principles of Engagement: (mis)Understanding the Community-Design Studio

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the benefits and challenges to universities and communities of design schools undertaking university-based community-design projects and suggests an ethical and practical framework for the planning, management, and evaluation of these studios.

Introduction

As the practice of bringing real-world problems into the academic design studio—and simultaneously bringing students into the community—grows in popularity, it is appropriate to pause to explore the conflicts of interest that result from the various participants' different motivations and to suggest practices that balance the needs of the community with the needs of the academy. Reflecting on their research and community engagement as faculty members at the University of Massachusetts, Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, planner Ann Forsyth and her collaborators Henry Lu and Patricia McGirr (Forsyth, Lu, and McGirr, 2000) extol the value of community-design studios, but they also warn that “the pre-professional nature of student work may burden low-income neighborhoods with low-quality design and planning products.”¹ This article explores the measures necessary to maintain excellence in both the process and the product of community-design studios and the institutional structures or community-design centers that support this engagement. It is written from the viewpoint of an advocate for these engaged studios.

¹ Forsyth, Lu, and McGirr (2000: 237).

The Changing Landscape of University-Based Community Research and Action

Many design education programs include community-design centers that have a service-learning component. Students and faculty of architecture, planning, and design schools have a long tradition of working in partnership with disadvantaged communities. Until recently, only faculty members whose practice was centrally concerned with community-design issues undertook such projects. Some community-design programs have received generous support from departments and universities, but more often, as Cardiff University participatory designer Bob Fowles explains, “an enthusiastic individual tutor in a generally unsupportive environment” performs the work.² Community-design advocates have often bucked institutional impediments to undertake activities they believe will result in greater community justice.

For example, University of Connecticut School of Landscape Architecture students worked with the Neighborhoods of Hartford, Inc., professor Kristin Schwab, and the author, to explore community design alternatives with neighborhood residents. The community development corporation provides the continuity and access to resources that are difficult to obtain within the structure of curricular design studios and in turn the university-based community-design studio is able to generate a variety of design options that are seldom available to underresourced communities. (See photos in the online appendix at www.huduser.org/periodicals/cityscape/vol10num3/cs_images.html.)

In cutting-edge design schools, however, community designers are no longer outsiders. As part of a larger movement to engage young people in service, universities are renewing their commitment to prepare students for their role as citizens. These institutions are also recognizing the inextricable links between their fate and that of their neighbors. Responding to the interest in community renewal, Yale, Penn State, and Howard Universities have augmented support for their university-based design centers. Increasing participation in community-design studios appears to benefit both scholars and community members, yet the expansion of community design is cause for concern. Are universities sending faculty and students into the field who are not equipped to do this type of work? Are universities being honest about their purpose in establishing these centers?

Evaluating the pitfalls and best practices of university-community partnerships, high standards must be set and understood as a basis for all involved.

Challenges to the Community-Design Studio

Researchers such as Henry Sanoff and Janet Eyler (Sanoff and Toker, 2004; Eyler, 2000) have documented university-community collaborations that have supported communities, students, faculty, and institutions. They have found that, among other benefits, service learning can lead students to develop lifelong habits of taking action in the public interest, and it can build the skills necessary to deal with the complexities of real-life problems. As thoughtful teachers and practitioners, however, we need to reflect on the challenges as well as the successes. A danger exists that

² Fowles (1992), as quoted in Towers (1995: 196).

well-intentioned projects may result in harm rather than benefit. For instance, service learning may perpetuate patterns of perceiving communities in terms of their deficiencies instead of their assets. Poorly executed projects—or even well-executed projects with poorly executed followup—may sour the community, the university, and students concerning the potential for change. Rather than ease town-gown (that is, community-university) tensions, such projects may intensify cross-cultural and institutional conflicts.

Sociologists Jane Allyn Piliavin, Jean A. Grube, and Peter L. Collero counsel that public service efforts “rarely contribute to the eradication of social problems and may under certain conditions actually serve to preserve and solidify social inequity” (Piliavin, Grube, and Callero, 2002: 469). Psychologist Carol M. Werner and her collaborators observe, “When student service scholars take away control from citizens, they can undermine citizens’ perceptions of competency; when faculty reduce students’ choice and responsibility, they can undermine students’ efficacy and desire to learn” (Werner, Voca, Openshaw, and Simons, 2002: 557). Even the publicity attendant upon excellent work can disguise the need for additional interventions after the cameras are switched off.

Roles in Community Research and Action

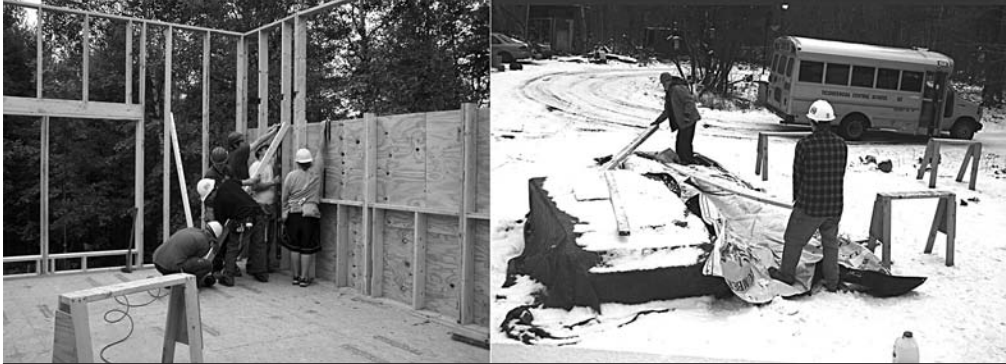
Each service-learning project typically has at least five groups of participants with distinct interests: university administration, community members, staff, faculty, and students. Psychologists Arthur A. Stukas and Michelle R. Dunlap suggest that “it is important to recognize not only the ultimate goal of betterment of the community, but also how each constituent group is represented and treated in the process of attaining a mutually agreed-upon better community” (Stukas and Dunlap, 2002: 411). Service-learning projects strive for synergy among the interests of each party. Because conflicts of interest are inevitable, however, responsible practice requires deliberately structuring projects in a way that avoids irresolvable conflicts. Collaborators at Indiana University Robert G. Bringle, a professor of psychology, and Julie A. Hatcher, a professor of education, explain that university-community relations require the same type of attention as interpersonal relationships. The best relationships are reciprocal (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002).

Each design and research project carries the responsibility to educate students, provide a tangible community benefit, consider community contexts, and respond to stakeholders’ needs and interests through a participatory process (Quinn, Gamble, and Denham, 2001). The best projects also build local capacity, are contextual, and endure (Quinn, Gamble, and Denham, 2001). (See exhibit 1.) As noted by the architect and planner Graham Towers, design quality should precede design innovation (Towers, 1995). Among the practitioner’s greatest challenges is delivering service learning in a sustainable way. Without this component, the danger exists that service learning will undermine rather than enhance community efforts to shape the environment.

Community-design studios must be built on a foundation of engagement with the community members who are the “clients” for the studio’s services. American Studies scholar W. Arthur Mehrhoff explains, “Community design is ultimately about empowering the citizens of local communities to shape their . . . own preferred futures by acquiring and applying information and knowledge about their communities in a far more systematic, thoughtful, and democratic manner than current practice” (Mehrhoff 1999: 122). Mary Comerio, a professor of architecture at the

Exhibit 1

Champlain Valley, New York, Technical Education Center: State-of-the-Art Green Building Techniques



Technical Education Center (TEC) students learn state-of-the-art green building techniques from teacher Kevin Shaw. The students build community capacity as they construct EQUITY HOME, whose design was informed by a collaborative research and participatory process funded by the New York State Council on the Arts. This initiative by the Housing Assistance Program of Essex County to replace low-quality depreciating assets that are a detriment with homes that conserve resources and create long-term value for residents and the community grew out of the research and design-build experience of the HUD-funded Community Outreach Partnership Center at Rensselaer, in which the author participated. Photo credit: Kevin Shaw, Champlain Valley TEC, Mineville Campus.

University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), notes, “Physical decisions are political decisions about who gets what, when, where, why, and how.” She expands her discussion about the political aspect: “Community design is guided by two principles of empowerment, one political, the other enabling. The first recognizes the rights of all citizens to have a voice in future decisions that affect the places they inhabit, work and linger in. Further, it recognizes the professional’s responsibility not to be neutral in the face of exploitation of people or the destruction of the environment” (Comerio, 1984: 227).

In many cases, communities require design services before they can explore the range of options. Meeting this need is one way in which curricular design programs are often effective.

For example, the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry Center for Community Design Research, directed by Cheryl Doble, offered a curricular design studio that explored options for redeveloping a vacant lot, which resulted from the demolition of a vacant property that harbored drug sales and prostitution, in a distressed Syracuse neighborhood that provides a home for many new immigrants, including refugees from Vietnam. Within the community, the Franciscan Collaborative Ministries and community translators supported the connection to the community and helped maintain ongoing dialogue with neighbors. The students generated a variety of options. This plethora of ideas was important for expanding the community’s perception of its options for redeveloping the vacant lot and remedying the former nuisance. Faculty introduced students to techniques of community engagement and the process of working in a participatory manner with a client to achieve a richer, more effective solution to the design problem than would be possible in isolation. (See exhibit 2.) A new pocket park constructed of sinuous landforms will accommodate daily use as well as festival events. The park, Freedom

Garden, also includes sculptures that provide narratives about the struggles of many residents on their journeys to freedom in the community. Recognizing the importance of bringing the project to completion, the studio director enlisted the assistance of the local chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects in identifying a local firm to partner with the studio and continue the project through to completion on a pro-bono basis. Apple Osborne Landscape Architecture stepped forward to assume this role. A member of Osborne's staff, Peter Ayer, followed the project from the initial student presentation and is in the process of completing the construction drawings. His participation helped both the students and the community focus on issues of constructability and budget. He will administer the project's construction, which is being funded by the Syracuse Neighborhood Initiative, which receives its funding in turn from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Exhibit 2

Using Models To Communicate With Neighborhood Residents



The use of models provides an important tool for communicating with neighborhood residents. Older residents may not be familiar with drawing conventions or design vocabulary. In the design process for the Freedom Garden in Syracuse, New York, younger community residents served as translators and participants as they examine the model with older residents. Photo credit: Cheryl Doble.

Fortunately, the movement provides a rich source of information for those who are establishing community-design studios. Leaders of such programs should familiarize themselves with the work of other practitioners and join the dialogue on community practice. Each studio should have clear principles of engagement. The Association for Community Design offers the following foundational tenets for community-design practice:

1. **Equity and justice.** Advocating for those who have a limited voice in public life.
2. **Diversity.** Promoting social equality through a discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities.
3. **Participatory decisionmaking.** Building structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow communities to make decisions.
4. **Quality of life.** Advancing the right of every person to live in a socially, economically, and environmentally healthy community.
5. **Integrative approach.** Creating strategies that reach beyond the design of the built environment.
6. **Place-based solutions.** Generating ideas that grow from place and build local capacity.
7. **Design excellence.** Promoting the highest standards of quality in the design and construction of the built environment.

It is not enough, however, merely to affirm these principles or to intend to follow them. To be responsible, university-based community-design practitioners must develop structures that facilitate the provision of both excellent design services and an excellent education. Without such structures, projects will fail due to an inability to sufficiently engage with the community. In *Planning Neighborhood Space with People*, community designer and UC Berkeley landscape architecture professor Randolph Hester considered the reasons that the Fletcher School playground he designed was vandalized and nearly abandoned. He confesses a lack of attention to the residents' values: "These goals require a long-term commitment to grass-roots community development, not just a flashy, expensive design for one playground. . . . I had said, in effect, that the product was more important than the process, yet the process of grass-roots community development was far more important to the residents than any single product" (Hester, 1984: x).

The Rules of Engagement

Fully engaged community-design studios hold great promise for improving communities and educating future design practitioners. The best structures for engagement include the following elements:³

1. **Transparency.** Every participant should have a picture of the entire project. Everyone should understand the type of work to be done and the skill levels of all the individuals doing the work. Quinn, Gamble, and Denham (2001) remind us that "when a student is providing a service to a . . . client or community, it is the student and preceptor's responsibility to inform the client of the skill level of the student, his or her capacity to provide that service, and any risks involved. The recipient of the service must have the opportunity to accept or deny student involvement" (Quinn, Gamble, and Denham, 2001: 19–20). Roles and responsibilities

³ Ronald F. Ferguson and the author previously identified these principles in an analysis of communitywide youth development initiatives (Dorgan and Ferguson, 2003).

might be formalized in a contract that covers several bases. First, faculty and students should understand how their work will be used and how it contributes to the overall effort. In turn, community members should be told what the studio's goal is and how their contribution of time and expertise will affect the final project. Players in each role should know what resources are available for the project and the path necessary for bringing the project to fruition.

It is especially important for community clients to understand the level of the university's commitment to the project. Community members may assume a level of commitment or expertise based on the regard with which the community holds the university. This example of successful "branding" may provide access to opportunities that otherwise would not be available to faculty and students, but it also may raise false expectations on the part of community members. Rarely are the skills of an entire institution brought to bear on a single service-learning project.

Communities also deserve to know if community service is truly voluntary. Unfortunately, it is increasingly common for schools to require students and faculty to perform community service. Such compulsory service not only contradicts the tenets of volunteerism, it also may seem disingenuous and, in some cases, it may decrease students' interest in volunteering in the future. Along the same lines, George Mason University public policy professor James P. Pfiffner notes that a public service ethic "implies more than just ethical behavior on the job; it also entails a dedication to the public interest and a commitment to mission accomplishment" (Pfiffner, 1999: 1). Therefore, participation in all community-design studios should be optional, and only students and faculty who can provide professional services that meet the needs of the community should be invited to participate.

- 2. Capacity.** Participants must have the capacity to fulfill their roles in the project. This requires intellectual, social, and, often, financial capital. Community-design initiatives require architects to expand their areas of knowledge, as described by Towers, to include urban history, the social organization of communities, government, and politics (Towers, 1995). Students may need training in research techniques, workplace skills, and the cultural norms of the community where they are to work. Community members, for their part, may require briefings to effectively fulfill their roles as decisionmakers.

Understandably, faculty members who lead design studios are often selected for their cutting-edge experimental work, strong philosophical convictions, and ability to give useful criticism. They may be less skilled in listening, working within political constructs, and implementing projects. The academy often does not address potential deficiencies in other practical skills, such as estimating costs, navigating building codes, and obtaining funding. Universities should address these areas, however, if they want their design studios to be successful for all involved. Mehrhoff explains: "Academics need to acknowledge the limits as well as the strengths of their academic disciplines in order to serve their communities more effectively" (Mehrhoff, 1999: xvi). To fill such gaps, the University of Hartford invites practicing professional engineers with appropriate expertise to serve as mentors, working alongside students and faculty in each of the school's community-based senior projects.

Before accepting a commission to work on a community-design project, studio directors need to determine whether adequate resources are available to undertake and complete the project

successfully. Universities can augment a studio's capacities by providing training, employing community liaisons, and funding project expenses. Programs with limited resources can successfully engage in community work by partnering, undertaking projects of a limited scope, or obtaining additional resources.

Towers describes an instance in which the Architectural Association in London worked with the tenants of the Castlemilk housing project to develop options for renovation of the project (Towers, 1995). The team's lack of skill in cost estimation resulted in the presentation of development scenarios that bore no relationship to real-world options or budgets. This left the tenants unable to progress toward their goal of community improvement, despite their investment of considerable time and resources in working with the studio.

In a successful example of collaboration, Brad Guy, with the Hamer Center for Community Design at The Pennsylvania State University, worked with a Hancock County commissioner, The Green Project, and the Building Goodness Foundation to construct two model projects that used recovered materials to create additional space for families living in crowded Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers in Pearlinton, Mississippi. Although the Building Goodness Foundation provided a long-term commitment to the community, local knowledge, and an established record of working with the families affected by Hurricane Katrina, the engaged learning team brought ideas and expertise in reusing salvaged material. The resulting stand-alone room of post and beam framing and applied panels was conceptualized to be more flexible than the typical accessory building. The footings used employ augers as hold-downs to allow the structure to be easily moved or dismantled. The only new materials used in the project were a white painted metal roof surface that reflects the sun and a radiant barrier material behind the rain-screen siding on the west side. The roof is sloped up to the north to allow for daylight exposure at the upper "clerestory." (See exhibit 3.)

The design-build team also incorporated a workbench, fish cleaning area, observation porch, and bench in the final project (see photo in the online appendix at www.huduser.org/periodicals/cityscape/vol10num3/cs_images.html).

- 3. Flexibility.** Community-design studios require resilient structures that have the flexibility necessary to respond to the conditions of real-world practice. Quinn, Gamble, and Denham (2001) report that one of the authors and her student team encountered resistance when beginning a community-needs assessment in a much-studied neighborhood. The team was able to successfully complete its work, however, by changing its plans and agreeing to teach area young people how to use computer software and a number of other skills that enabled them to produce their own exhibit about the community.

One of the greatest challenges to flexibility in service learning is the university's academic schedule. Providing solutions to complex community issues usually requires engagement for an extended time. To address schedule-related constraints, Scott Wing, a professor of architecture at Penn State, offers a spring semester research course that prepares students for a summer community-design-build studio; this course, in turn, is followed by a fall class in which students reflect on their experience to address the element described next in this article.

Exhibit 3

View of the West Side of a Shed Built in Pearlington, Mississippi, June 2007



The siding, as seen on the west side of a shed built in June 2007 for Billy Ray Raines, is "barge-board" salvaged from New Orleans houses. The 2- by 6-inch posts and beams are from a deconstructed Ocean Springs, Mississippi, home. Photo credit: Brad Guy.

4. Accountability. Community-design studios must incorporate systems to ensure that the work product, the community relationship, and other aspects of performance meet professional-quality standards and educational requirements.

Projects in communities where the university has a vested interest pose special challenges because there may be legitimate suspicion of the designers' motives in undertaking a project and conflicts between the neighbors' goals and the goals of the university that employs the faculty. The institution's interest, however, may allow the studio access to more resources than it otherwise would enjoy. Resolution of this any conflict between the university's institutional interests and community interests usually requires university involvement beyond that of an individual faculty member.

Due to the complex nature of community-design issues, reflective practice—the process by which professionals learn from their work, as first described by the influential thinker and Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Donald A. Schon (1995)—and peer review are among the most promising strategies for evaluating and continually improving the design studio's work. In the limited studies undertaken to date, reflective practice appears to benefit both students and the

community. Evaluation should occur before project implementation, during the course of the work, and after completion of the project. Whenever possible, postoccupancy studies should also be conducted. Evaluation participants should be selected from as broad a base as possible and should include at least students, faculty, and community members.

Community-design projects can benefit both students and communities. In order to do so, it is not enough simply to schedule projects that examine important social issues. Community clients have the right to expect the highest quality professional services, and students should be exposed to the best practices. Therefore, as advocates for community-design studios, we have a responsibility to take precautions to ensure excellence in our work. We need to acknowledge that community-design services that fail to meet the needs of the community can do more harm than good and may undermine the delivery of other professional services to that community. Those who plan engaged community-design studios must be careful in project selection and should ensure that adequate resources are available to meet their obligations. Sponsors can design programs that are more likely to produce a successful project by adhering to the principles of engagement, which means the programs should be transparent, capable, flexible, and accountable.

As Mehrhoff observed: “Universities offer excellent venues for studying the messy order of communities. . . . My personal odyssey into community design has led me to profess the firm belief that our future well-being as a civilization requires fundamentally rethinking the shape and shaping of our communities” (Mehrhoff, 1999: xvi). The engaged community-design studio is a success when the community receives value in excess of the project’s cost and members of the university prepare for a lifetime of contributing to their communities and improving conditions throughout the world.

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