

Working Space: Notes on Design Studio Work in the Public Realm

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Is it possible to satisfy the pedagogical objectives of a design studio and at the same time meet the particular needs of a community group? Such a question is certain to point to a general conflict in architectural practice — the contradiction between the private desire for self-creation on the one hand and a type of public responsibility to a community on the other. Self-expression unavoidably shapes the production of architecture and is typically valued as apart of an architectural education. Many students admit that they chose the field of architecture because of an appeal to a study which allows for self-expression or "creativity." Furthermore, student work is typically evaluated with a bias toward individual originality. However, an intern leaving school quickly realizes that the practical needs of a community require restraint and accommodation. The two sets of needs, one private and the other public, are inherently different and often in direct conflict. The attempt to bring them to a single common goal eventually leads to some sort of dominant ideology. Therefore, to avoid the type of constraints that would support such ideologies, the contradictions between self-creation and community accommodation should be seen as a defining product of the incommensurability of private and public ideals. Because both concerns are necessary components of architecture, we must ask, how can a studio allow both self-creation and community-responsibility to shape the work?

This paper uses the work of several studios to respond to the challenge of combining the practice of design with the needs of others outside of the context of the design studio. The projects described are various collaborations between design studios and projects coordinated by the Small Town Center at Mississippi State University School of Architecture, a community design organization which responds to the concerns of small towns in rural Mississippi. The projects began in the Small Town Center and were reshaped to meet the objectives of a design studio. In this way, the community needs are not artificially constructed for the studio but are current and actual.

One project is the design and construction of a wheelchair ramp; another includes the planning of an existing site that had once been an African American College; and, the third

project is the design and construction of casework for a Head Start facility classroom. Each project has both actual expectations from the community group and opportunities for learning in the studio.

OKOLONA COLLEGE SITE

Dr. Jessie Mosley, president of the state chapter of the National Council for Negro Women (NCNW) contacted the Small Town Center for advice and assistance. Her group had purchased 65 acres outside a small town named Okolona which had a collection of abandoned historic buildings which from 1905 to 1964 housed an African American college. Her group imagined that the college site could be a much needed gathering place for the NCNW's annual meetings as well as be used for local community and church activities. Dr. Mosley and the site committee had an inspiring vision of the site's future but very few resources to plan and develop the site. It became an open opportunity for the studio class of fifteen student and one faculty to respond to the challenge.

HEAD START CLASSROOM

Charles Tillery, the director of a local organization which manages fourteen Head Start facilities contacted the Small Town Center, again for advise and assistance. As with the NCNW the Head Start group had a real need to address ADA requirements and receive advice regarding the feasibility of the existing facilities to meet the basic needs of the Head Start guidelines. Through a Humanity and Arts Grant the Small Town Center was able to provide some of the basic design work, but again it was with eleven studio students that an in-depth study of a typical classroom was made possible.

In both the Okolona College project and the Head Start facility the needs of the community group were a set of concerns that were different from the pedagogical objectives of the design studio. In both, the studio work left the typical, protected condition of a hypothetical project to a more ambiguous condition of working.

The work of a design studio can be thought of as a type of working space, in the sense that the studio is a learning

environment that both requires and creates room for decisions to be made. The amount of room for making decisions is directly analogous to the generosity of the working space and the capacity of the students that are making decisions. The private need for self-creation must be preserved. In other words, a space for experimentation and confirmation must be maintained for the student to gain confidence. At the same time, the students should be faced with outside concerns that challenge the private relationship that they have with their work. The combination of such outside forces along with sufficient room for individual expression make up the working space of a studio that is responsive to both community needs and the development of a student's confidence. Confidence can be thought of as a faith or belief that one will act in a right, proper or effective way; a feeling or consciousness of one's powers or of reliance on one's circumstances. The working space of a studio has the potential to allow students to gain such confidence. If the conditions for making decisions are artificial, or in other words, if the working space is fictional the resulting work will generally be conceptual. On the other hand, if the working space has a degree of outside reality, the work will begin to be more relevant to broader, more public concerns.

Working space that is shaped by outside forces creates a condition of exposure, a way of working that allows the students to feel their thoughts fragile, establishing a condition which challenges the authority of an individual's effort for self-expression. The conditions of exposure that are created by collaborations between studio and actual projects create a working space within which decisions are made in a more public context. The room for making decisions becomes a room inhabited by others and the decisions are made in the presence of others.

For example, the ramp project began with the Coleman family, a family consisting of Walter, a fifty-year old man confined to a wheelchair from multiple sclerosis, and his eighty-year old parents. The family has lived in the same house for thirty years with access to Walter's bedroom and living quarters separated by a 17" height difference from the ground to the threshold. For all this time Walter's mother has lifted him up the two steps — a task she now finds more difficult with her aging body. It was clear that access to the front door must be made easier with an outdoor ramp.

A group of students worked together for two days to design the ramp, detail the construction, calculate the required materials and assign labor responsibilities. By mid-week the students ordered the materials and began construction. Within four days the existing porch and roof posts were dismantled, the footings poured, the framing erected and the decking and additional roof applied.

At one level the ramp was an orthodox architectural project, built for a private family on private land and solving an easily-understandable problem. However, the working space for the ramp was not only held within the site, but it also included the construction skills of the students, and the struggles and debates among students and between students

and faculty. In the design process a space for making decisions is created by producing representations to communicate ideas to others. Architectural drawing makes a particular type of working space; its nature, its accuracy, as well as its degree of indeterminism can be thought of as a space for decision making.

For the ramp, the working space was certainly one of exposure, a condition made especially vivid when the students ripped off the old porch boards and took down a structure which had been there for thirty years or more and which in fact was more substantial in its endurance than the newness of the students' design ideas. Such an uncertainty about the future of an idea in the presence of outside forces leads to a working space within which decisions are made with a larger set of concerns than the pursuit of self-expression. The work's authority is no longer that of the individual but relies upon broader concerns, which are internal to the problem, such as the strength of the eighty-year old mother, the turning radius of the wheelchair, the \$750 budget, the path of the sun and the pleasure or discomfort that it might offer, the ability to imagine the forces of water, and the ability to share an idea among twenty people. The working space is an interior condition to the site, the future use of the ramp and the collective experiences of the studio.

Richard Sennett, in his book, *The Uses of Disorder*, says that a certain kind of self-sufficient aloneness and singleness is born, paradoxically, at the moment when a man sees he is not going to be able to be the master of all that occurs in his life.

The uncertainties of such an exposed working space allows the contradictory aims of self-creation and public responsibility to coexist. A new confidence emerges from the context of uncertainties as a person relies upon her own beliefs and values. In the presence of outside forces the private desire for self-realization can remain private and not take on a false sense of control. The public exposure of uncertainties disciplines the desire for self-expression, strengthening the student's abilities to make decisions in public.

Often the working space of the studio takes on multiple meanings. It is simultaneously a physical place to work, the institution of studio dialogue, as well as a type of temporal space to develop ideas. For example, such a multi-dimensional working space was created as part of the Okolona College studio. During the first weeks of the semester in preparation to begin work on the actual college site the physical working space for the studio was constructed. To make a useful working space in the basement of the architecture building a table large enough for the 16 people in the studio to work around was designed and constructed. The table's objectives were both useful and pedagogical. The table was planned to be as useful as possible; in other words, its use was generalized to include activities such as meeting, drawing, modeling, eating, and other possible activities. The design and construction of the table was considered pedagogically as a temporal space necessary to develop solidarity

in the studio and to establish a shared ethic toward the work. In other words, the table was both a place to work and a model for the ideas of usefulness that were hoped for in the college site.

The design and construction of the table created a type of working space as a constructed room for making decisions as a group. At first each student developed separate design proposals which were discussed as they developed in order to define general design parameters. Students were assigned certain aspects of the table to research and report to the studio. Such group projects reshape the role of the instructor, she must take a more active design role, shifting from critic to a sort of director, guiding the work and listening for ideas that hold promise to the design. The size of the table was eventually settled to be four feet by sixteen feet. The aim of the design was to make one table, requiring that each student learn the value of ideas which survive criticism as well as accept the need to reduce their urge for individual expression. Nevertheless, even though many parameters of the table had been agreed upon, at one point there were still fifteen different proposals, each bearing a type of signature of a student's self-expression. In order to progress past the condition of individual designs the instructor collected the various proposals and drew up a single table design. Such an active involvement put the faculty in an unusual condition of exposure, and provided the studio with a single design ready to be criticized and developed. Working within the uncertainties of a group often requires the faculty to replace the authority of the institution with a more immediate teaching role; exposing the extent of one's knowledge and not simply relying on the institutional position of authority. The confidence that is extended to the faculty is based on a relationship of trust and the communication in the studio is transformed.

A similar shared design condition was created in the Head Start project. The objective was to design and construct casework pieces for a classroom to be supportive of the programmed activities as well as to play out shared principles and to establish a type of discipline in making. The casework is conceived as being able to both shape space and hold imaginative qualities. Such a capacity to hold and perform can be understood as a model of the potential to fill the working space with possibilities. In other words, the working space that is being made is not simply a neutral condition for any possible activity but a room of choices. The capacity to make decisions requires choices and room to perceive the difference between possible choices.

As in the table design the casework began with eleven separate proposals. The various proposals had a performative role; however, instead of directing the work toward a single shared construction, the casework project left the question of multiple pieces open. The individual proposals shaped a dialogue concerning whether one type of casework could accommodate all the needs of the room or whether several could co-exist. The natures of the different pieces emerged in discussion. Four pieces developed as essential for their ability to accommodate and render experience. A long, low, gener-

ous piece provided protection for the rug (the rug being a distinct aspect of the room as it is the only group gathering space in the room). A space divider/accommodating storage piece emerged—a piece that left an open-endedness—its need to associate with other pieces was always present. A piece that moved and allowed a child to inhabit it was decided as critical to provide a broader range of experiences and corresponded with the size of the space divider. A tall, figural (almost human in form) piece emerged as a wall-hugger. Its height raised the level of the room in contrast to the low pieces. A question of compatibility was raised, what is the value of difference?

In the design discussions students would often present work as if to convince the studio instructor of their ideas. A degree of patience to not limit the discussion is necessary to maintain a working space open to multiple ideas. Instead of attempting to establish constraints to resolve conflict between student proposals the teacher can sometimes best perform her role by reflecting the student's thought, repeating them in a way, hoping to help the students to edit the useful ideas from the less considered. The open ended condition—a working space—became the result of patient studio discussion.

The conditions of the working space shape the products that are made. For example, the table was shaped by an instructive working space resulting in a construction that instructs the space it is placed in as well as its range of uses. Even though the table satisfies a broad set of probable uses its size, geometry, direction, and structure have a priority to any particular use. The casework on the other hand has a performative function. The different pieces have the capacity to perform a variety of roles allowing the people who use them a high degree of choice. Furthermore, the pedagogical function of the casework was part of a discussion to keep an open working space.

The design work for Okolona College site further demonstrates the relationship between the working space of a studio and the work that is produced. The initial expectation of both the NCNW and the members of the studio was that a general plan would be produced. In other words, just as the individual table designs eventually led to one table there was an expectation that the individual site proposals would lead to an overall site plan. Such a definitive conclusion would typically be the product of design work in practice. However, at one point it became apparent that such an expectation was unnatural to the working space of the studio. Like the casework, the college site proposals took a more performative role.

The working space for the Okolona College site included the presence of several people and the stories of their lives. Dr. Mosley told the students of her struggle with civil rights in Mississippi, and not simply her vision for the site, but a larger hope for a more considerate society. Willy Larry, a former student of the Okolona College, told of his time at the College and of an influential teacher who worked with the students to build the brick pavilion that stands at the center of the campus plan. Russell Brooks, a leader in one of the local churches, shared his vision of the site as a place for the community. The

testimonies of these and other people who are related to the site shaped the working space of the studio.

The existing buildings on the site in various states of decay also told a story of use and neglect. Another force was the prairie landscape and the particular way the existing buildings sit in an open field. A fortunate and unexpected opportunity transformed the quiet, emptiness of the site into a lively production space. During the course of the studio a gospel play performed by a group from the local church community was planned for the site. The students agreed to design and construct the stage set for the production. One of the buildings on the site with a continuous west-facing colonnade provided the setting for the stage. The students designed and built a representation of a "rich woman's house." The empty site was transformed with lights, gospel music, a Christian pageant, and a lively audience. The students were able to see their work being used in public, their ideas exposed to the tastes and expression of a community with different ideals.

Testimonies of people who were once students at the college, the conditions of exposure of the stage set being used, the transformation of the building on the site into a stage, as well as the painting of the stage set in the basement of the architecture building along side the table being made formed the studio's working space. The public nature of the working

space led to design proposals that were more open to public use. The work of the Okolonastudio suggests that the working space for a studio becomes a room for making decisions; the design proposals generated from such a studio create room for others to participate in. In other words, the creation of space for making decisions in the presence of others leads to architectural proposals that are shaped by the working space.

The design proposals of the studio were not presented as complete, final site plans but as a series of steps, stages of development that would be built incrementally. For example, a proposal would suggest that as a first step an existing building be repaired to begin using the site, perhaps a small improvement such as the installation of public restrooms for possible community events. A job training program might begin in one building, to be relocated in a later stage by a new building. With such incremental improvements each student described a possible future for the site.

It is the claim that a working space as has been described in its variety of ways will lead to design proposals for others to participate in. Working in this manner leads to a different and more productive work. By establishing general notions which re-occur and are repeated, the work is generalized, yet particular. A specific grain is established yet an indeterminacy is maintained.