

Serving Communities: Learning in the Real World

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Introduction

With the next century approaching it is time to reflect on architecture education. The standard practice of teaching studio is through the development of theoretical projects disconnected from the needs of people and places and the understanding of different cultures. The outcomes of the theoretical studio projects are strongly developed, controlled, formal solutions with little understanding of the architectural intervention in communities. Considering the impact of the built environment on society, as educators we have the opportunity to develop studio education by connecting our students to communities, cultures, people and places within our cities, and to define the social responsibility and role of the architect and architecture education in the future.

This paper challenges the standard mode of teaching theory in the studio without connection and application to real projects, places and people. This paper considers the model of Service Learning as a vehicle to develop community projects with the intent to apply theory to practice and to connect students to cultures other than their own, to real places and people. The Service Learning model presents an opportunity to define the future social responsibility of the profession and the students we educate.

By combining theory and application in the studio, Service Learning is developed as a model that should be part of all architectural curricula.

The Service Learning model in the studio is emphasized as a process of understanding specific needs of a community, creating and articulating possibilities in design, connecting students to people and formulating in students an understanding of the development of design within a specific cultural framework. The studio project selected for this paper focuses on evaluating the use of Service Learning to connect students to different communities and cultures and to enhance the knowledge and skills defined as important in the academic discipline that are also critical in the professional practice. Service Learning presents an opportunity to reinforce the link between the profession, the community and education. This connection of the students to people and places in communities attempts to develop in them an understanding of the responsibility and impact of architecture on society.

In his presentation "Integrating Community Service in Classroom Teaching," Frank Ford, the former Associate Director for the Colorado Center for Community Development, reinforces this connection of students to communities: "Students, like most of us, tend to internalize learning in a more lasting way when they analyze theoretical principles in terms of real places and events they can see, hear and touch."

Unlike community outreach projects that award credit to students for community service based on the number of volunteer

hours put toward a project, in Service Learning the academic objectives of the student are the primary focus. Projects are developed whereby students work with the community as a vehicle to achieve the goals and objectives for both the studio and the community. The projects defined in the studio establish community needs as a foundation to apply skills and to contemplate the impact of the intervention on the community, the culture, our society and our future. Architecture students have the opportunity to use newly acquired problem-solving design skills and knowledge in real-life applications.

The goals of the Service Learning model developed for the studio project described later in this paper and architectural education are:

- * To provide cross-cultural experiences for the students.
- * To enhance student learning by joining theory with experience and thought with action.
- * To fill unmet needs defined by the community through direct service, which is meaningful and necessary.
- * To create a collaborative environment by enabling students to help others, give of themselves and to develop the capacity to care.
- * To develop an environment of collaborative participation among students, faculty and the community.
- * To increase the civic awareness of students.
- * To expose students to societal inadequacies.
- * To develop a richer context for student learning by connecting students to places and people with real needs.

While students perform a valuable, significant and necessary service that has real consequences to the community, the process is based on a reciprocal relationship in which the service reinforces and strengthens the studio learning, and the studio learning reinforces and strengthens the service. The pedagogy of Service Learning ultimately produces a greater impact than either process could have produced individually. The students learn by applying theory to practice, thinking, discussing and interacting while learning from themselves as well as others.

Service Learning presents a vehicle to connect students to different communities and cultures. Students develop a greater responsibility for their own learning by working with organizations to develop an understanding of the specific wants and needs of the community. The students also impact local issues and needs and develop an understanding of the richness of the cultural, social and physical environment of a particular place.

Mark Cooper, the coordinator of the Volunteer Action Center, captures the necessity of Service Learning in the curriculum by writing,

We need to be creating a fertile environment in which students have as many opportunities as possible to learn and serve, give of themselves, and enter into a caring relationship with others. The steady growth and eventual institutionalization of Service Learning will transform our universities from isolated repositories of talent, knowledge, and resources, to central agents for civic peace, social justice and community understanding.

Throughout the Service Learning process it is critical for students to reflect on their process and learning experiences. This reflection is developed by maintaining a journal for writing and sketching. Generally what is revealed in the reflective process is the development in students of empathy, social and self-awareness, self-confidence, social responsibility, and a sense of caring. In addition, there is greater awareness developed in understanding the impact of one's actions, the development of a project and the overall design skills needed to communicate ideas to the client.

Although the process of reflection further defines the goals and objectives of the individual as well as the studio, a number of different outcomes can occur when instructors and students get involved in Service

Learning projects. First, they can go through the actions of working with a community and learn nothing. Second, stereotypes can be reinforced through poorly planned interactions with the community, and students can take away the wrong lesson about a culture and place. Last and ideally, students will learn something about themselves and others, their community and neighborhoods, and about pressing local and global issues while making a positive impact.

Studio Structure and Process

This studio was a second-year undergraduate course in the Environmental Design program, in the College of Architecture and Planning, and was taught for two consecutive semesters. The studio had fifteen students each semester. The class met three times per week for three hours each session. The students select the studio and instructor through a lottery system. Each instructor described the projects and course objectives to all second-year students. The students requested the project and professor based on their personal interests. Students who selected the Service Learning studio are initially interested in some aspect of culture and community service. The key was to match up the community needs to the interest and skill level of the students.

In order to explore Service Learning as a positive change in architecture pedagogy and methodology, and its application to learning in the studio setting, it is necessary to understand the steps in developing the specific studio project. First, the Service Learning goals defined earlier in this paper were used as a guideline to develop the objectives of the project and its context in the architecture studio. Second, after reviewing several different communities and organizations, a site was selected. The

community organization and project site were then visited by the studio. Third, we explored the cultural history and development of the site. Next, we worked with the community organization to define the community and project needs. Finally, we developed and implemented specific studio projects and outcomes for the site.

The groundwork for selecting the community and the site, as well as an understanding of the cultural and community needs, is researched and established by the instructor prior to the beginning of the studio. This will assure the proper match between the community and the level of students. Using the Service Learning goals as a guideline, various organizations and community groups in several neighborhoods surrounding the downtown Denver area were contacted for potential projects. The neighborhoods are poor, are typically under-served by the city agencies and are predominantly a minority population. After meeting with each group and evaluating their specific missions and goals with the objectives of the studio, a community, organization and site were selected.

The Neighborhood

The neighborhood is located at the southwest perimeter of downtown Denver. The revitalization is slow and the neighborhood displays poverty, displacement and community decay, though less than four decades ago the area was thriving and prosperous. Much of the earlier prosperity was along Santa Fe Drive, the corridor that connects the neighborhood to downtown. Along Santa Fe Drive, a six-block area shows evidence of slow change. At the northern end, at the threshold heading into downtown, is a high density housing development created in the early '80s as a token gateway between the neighborhood and downtown. The final stretch of the Santa Fe Drive corridor moves directly into downtown and ends at the Auraria Higher Education Campus.

The Santa Fe Drive corridor is rich in history. It started as the neighborhood's main artery and brought travelers and vitality to the area in the form of settlers, goods and commerce. The economic significance of the corridor dates back to the early 1800s when it was a wagon trail for settlers traveling from the east and south to the "Wild West"; it was connected to the Old Santa Fe Trail through New Mexico. The area was very prosperous with burgeoning development up until the 1950s.

In the 1950s and '60s, there was a great exodus from the city into the suburbs. The city's economy, which was based primarily on manufacturing and warehousing at that time, shifted toward a service-sector economy. The working-class neighborhoods in the city deteriorated. Unemployment and poverty rates grew. In the 1970s, north of the 15th Avenue border of the Santa Fe Drive corridor, the Auraria Higher Education Center was built. With its great success, the Auraria Higher Education Center caused the demise of housing and businesses in the heart of the city. Additionally, along the southern border of the campus is a heavily trafficked avenue that essentially forms a barrier that further disconnects the downtown area from the neighborhood.

The Lincoln Park neighborhood, whose ethnic population is now predominately Latino, saw greater neighborhood disintegration and separation from economic stability. As the neighborhood fell into disrepair, more waves of homeowners flowed out of the area into the suburbs. Rental rates grew and properties fell into further decay. By the late '70s, the neighborhood had some of the highest poverty, crime and drop-out rates in the city. After the campus was built, the neighborhood decreased in size and population, yet conversely the non-profit organizations found that the neighborhood needs had greatly increased. Amidst the decaying area, neighborhood organizations began to develop as a way of rebuilding, reunifying and developing a strong community.

In his article "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," Kenneth Frampton writes,

Twenty years ago the dialectical interplay between civilization and culture still afforded the possibility of maintaining some general control over the shape and significance of the urban fabric. The last two decades, however, have radically transformed the metropolitan centers of the developed world. What were still essentially 19th century city fabrics in the early 1960s have since become progressively overlaid by the two symbiotic instruments of Megalopolitan development- the free-standing high-rise and the serpentine freeway. The former has finally come into its own as the latter. The typical downtown which, up to twenty years ago, still presented a mixture of residential stock with tertiary and secondary industry, has now become little more than a burolandschaft city-scape: the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture. 3

Happily, in the Lincoln Park neighborhood, the culture is still there, despite the general accuracy of Kenneth Frampton's description, and the Santa Fe Drive corridor provides a hopeful means of reconnecting the local culture with the metropolitan uniformity. The neighborhood is bound by four major traffic arterial routes, but the primary connection to the city is still the corridor, which is heavily traveled by the residents of the area as well as commuters coming into the city.

The Community and Organization

The neighborhood site selected for this specific studio is an area called Lincoln Park. Today this area is undergoing a slow process of redevelopment through the work of several organizations in the neighborhood. The organization we selected to collaborate with is a group called NEWSSED. They define themselves as follows:

The Community Development Corporation was incorporated in 1973 as a not-for-profit, community driven, economic development corporation. Its primary focus has been to solve long-term economic problems in disadvantaged communities by creating jobs for neighborhood residents; securing and co-

ordinating resources for neighborhood revitalization; providing employment and training services that promote self-sufficiency; developing needed shopping areas and services; fostering minority and neighborhood business ownership; increasing home ownership and affordable rental opportunities; and promoting the arts and the area's predominately Latino culture as economic development strategies.

The primary reason for selecting the organization was the apparent focus and effort to maintain slow gentrification in the Lincoln Park area and the Santa Fe Drive corridor by carefully balancing new economic growth. The organization works closely with the community to develop long-term plans and to define neighborhood needs. In addition to helping define the current and future neighborhood needs, they have been deeply involved in working with the local community for the past 25 years. In addition to developing architectural standards that reflect a specific cultural framework, NEWSSED acknowledges the Latino culture and works to develop pride within the community.

As a means to attract visitors to the area, they sponsor special events and cultural activities, including the largest Cinco de Mayo celebrations in the nation. These events, in addition to outreach programs, have contributed greatly to the development of the area and understanding of the culture. With the work of NEWSSED, the Lincoln Park neighborhood and Santa Fe Drive corridor are in the process of becoming a "Cultural Art Zone" specifically focusing on Latino artists in the area. This development has drawn a large number of artists, who are being displaced from lower downtown by high rents and expansion, to relocate into the neighborhood. Slowly, a transformation and revitalization of the area is taking place.

Studio Process

The location of the neighborhood in relation to downtown, the strong cultural influences and the revitalization being pushed forward presented an ideal site for the development of the Service Learning project. NEWSSED met with the students to review and define the needs and assets of the neighborhood established by the group in response to community meetings. In addition, they discussed historically how the area had changed and developed. The specific projects defined included a Landmark project that was developed both semesters for 2 weeks each with the intent to be further developed as a design-build project, a Cultural Center that was developed for 7 weeks during the first semester, and a Community Theater that was developed for 12 weeks the second semester.

The primary objective of the studio was to present design possibilities to NEWSSED for developing the "Cultural Arts Zone." The objective of the Landmark project was to identify the beginning of the "Cultural Arts Zone" on the corridor between 6th Avenue and 15th Avenue. The Cultural Center and Community Theater were intended as places where Latino history would be presented to younger generations with newly de-

veloped ideas and attitudes, places where songs, art, dance and poetry of past and present times would be experienced and shared by many generations. The intent of the projects is that over time the evidence of traditions and ideas shared in these places would shape future generations.

The studio projects supported the further development of cultural traditions. Since the ethnic culture is so intertwined with the neighborhood, it was important for the students to understand the history and memories of the people who live and work in the area. The community makeup includes a diverse population, including new immigrants as well as long-term residents.

Prior to any design work being developed by the students it was imperative that they gathered information and experienced first-hand the neighborhood over a period of time and at different hours of the day. The students quickly realized that the projects identified by the community reflect the transformation of a place, its people and the culture that dominates.

Typically, architects and students best learn about the effects of culture on architecture and history through the experience of traveling in different countries. Traveling—immersing oneself in cultural traditions, experiencing the architecture that defines a place—is one of the greatest forms of education. It fosters not only an understanding of history and cultures other than our own, but also a better understanding of our own culture. In his book *The Poetics of Architecture*, Anthony Antoniades states,

Architecture has been of particular significance as an agent of peace, of cross-cultural and intellectual evolution....The exotic has a dual nature that can render it beneficial to those who involve themselves with it; they can learn from it directly, or they can sharpen the understanding they have of their own culture.¹

In the United States, we experience traces of different ethnic cultures working within a larger American cultural framework. These pockets of neighborhoods add richness to all urban fabrics. They offer us cultural diversity and a sense of historical depth regarding the memory of the locale and region and the changes that have taken place over time. The transformation also reflects the history of another culture and the memories carried forward by the people who previously dominated the area. In the Lincoln Park neighborhood, the students were immersed in the language, the foods and the traditions of another culture within their own. With the new design standards established by the community organizations there is evidence of an architectural style that reflects a culture, a time and a place other than was originally established in the area.

The client presented to the students the development of Mexico City from the time of the Aztec to present day as the starting point for understanding the history and culture of the people. Additional studies included the works of historical and contemporary Latino architects, as well as authors, poets and artists who focused on the changes that took place in Mexico throughout history. The Santa Fe Drive corridor further enriched

the students' experiences and studies by allowing them to visit artists' studios, architectural offices, restaurants, bookstores, shops, art galleries and The Museo de las Americas, the only museum of Latino art in the state.

Since all three projects were developed in such depth there was a better understanding of the region, the culture and people in addition to the design problems. The students learned to critique and evaluate their projects in terms of how the culture informed the design process both in historic models and their own designs; the community needs, assets and desires; the economic and cultural diversity in the community; the impact of their design proposals on people and places; how their proposals resolve the immediate goals, but also address future generations; and how compatible the architecture is to the standards set by the community and the physical development of the neighborhood.

Project One - The Landmark

The objective of the first project, the Landmark, was to identify the entry into the "Cultural Art Zone" along the corridor. The project was developed over the course of two semesters. The students spent time immersed in the neighborhood documenting, observing, measuring, mapping and absorbing the site. An opportunity to develop the project into a design-build was presented to the client and studio. Robinson Brick Company was willing to donate all materials needed to build the landmark, and the college would donate all labor. This would take it beyond the presentation of design possibilities into reality.

A one-day charette was held. Five teams were created, consisting of five students each, comprised of three undergraduates from the studio and two graduate students from the architecture program. The program was developed, a corner site selected and information was given to each team. The structures were small, 100 sq. ft. or less, and had to offer signage, shelter, seating and the use of brick as a primary material. Each team worked on drawings and models over an eight-hour period.

At the end of the day, a jury consisting of community leaders, architects and artists from the neighborhood critiqued the work and selected one project for further development. The selected team continued to work on the project for an additional two weeks to create working drawings. Once the drawings were completed they were taken to the city for permitting.

What the students gained from the experience was a knowledge of the design process, an exploration of how culture informs the design process, an understanding of the community needs and assets, experience working with a community of economic and cultural diversity, and an understanding of the obstacles often encountered in "real life" projects.

Projects Two and Three - The Cultural Center and The Community Center

Both the Cultural Center and Community Center projects focused on the process of site selection, information gathering, precedent studies and cultural impact on the development of the proposed design. Two vacant lots on the corridor were marked for development. For the Cultural Center a narrow slot, approximately 25' wide x 150', long was selected. Precedent studies that focused on urban infill were used to develop a model for the project. For the Community Theater, a larger lot, approximately 150 ft square, adjacent to a turn-of-the-century structure was selected.

Information regarding site analysis, historic analysis and cultural history were developed in a comprehensive booklet. The students were asked to draw conclusions based on their findings and to use the information for the basis of their design proposals. The booklet also included design proposals and was given to the community organization for further reference.

The students met with the client at the midpoint of the project and for a final presentation. As questions arose in the studio regarding the project, weekly contact was made with the client for clarification. In addition to the Service Learning goals, other studio objectives included:

- * The exploration and evaluation of how culture informs the design process.
- * Focus on the following principles of urban design: that it 1) shapes the physical forms of cities, 2) maximizes the public benefits and minimizes the adverse impacts imposed by physical development, 3) resolves the immediate goals, but also addresses future generations, and 4) is dedicated to the public realm, through the means of a highly articulated and compatible architecture and physical development.
- * How the culture influences design and the impact the decisions have on the people.

The process of developing a greater compassion, sensitivity and understanding of the development and history of the Latino community in the neighborhood and the historic development of the area had a profound effect on how the students approached their designs. The outcome of the projects in terms of architectural design reflected 1) the culture and context, 2) strong conceptual development, 3) a level of complexity and richness in the building and detail, and 4) a breadth of design possibilities for the development of the area.

A greater perspective of cultural and economic diversity gave the students a new sense of design and community connection. Also, they learned that to create a sense of place, an understanding of the contextual history of the community and the culture is needed. The Service Learning project gave us all a better understanding of the role that history plays in the development of a culture within a community, an understanding necessary for creating comprehensive architecture.

Reflections

The development of the Service Learning process and project required a great deal more time and preparation than a standard studio project. However, the disadvantages of the Service Learning process were far outnumbered by the advantages of connecting the students with the community and culture. The problems were clearly identified and will be considered for future projects:

- *Identify the decision makers*
It is important to understand how decisions are made by the communities and organizations. Although we worked closely with the organization, it later became apparent that many of the final decisions regarding the implementation of the study were determined by parties who were not directly involved in the process.
- *Define the intent and responsibility of all parties involved in the project in writing*
A letter of intent and support from the community as well as a memorandum of understanding between both parties clearly identifies the goals and outcomes determined by the university as well as the client.
- *A written commitment from all parties to see the project through to completion*
A letter of memorandum is required to identify the responsibilities of both the community and the college to see the project through to completion.
- *Clearly identified outcomes*
It is imperative to clearly define the expectations of the community and students. Clearly define what the client and students will receive at the end of the process. It may include documentation in the form of booklets, models or drawings.
- *Clearly defined financial responsibilities*
If the client will be keeping the models, drawings or booklets it is important to identify costs and financial commitments beforehand.
- *Flexibility*
You are working with real projects that cannot be as tightly controlled as theoretical projects. The students need to be made aware of the possible changes that will occur throughout the project. Faculty need to have back-up plans when changes occur that will continue to reinforce the process, project and objectives.
- *Time*
The Service Learning process and preparation is much more time consuming but the rewards are much greater.

- *Product*

Generally clients are much more conservative and realistic about their architectural expectations. The exploration that is often apparent in theoretical projects is not always appropriate for community projects. The drawings and models must clearly communicate the design intent.

Conclusion

Service Learning allows students to take on an activist role. The connection to the neighborhood and its people was key in beginning to understand the impact of architecture on society, on individuals and on communities. In turn there was a greater understanding of the impact culture can have on architecture. This Service Learning relationship allows for collaboration and interaction between architects, students and community organizations, developing skills in students as effective leaders, civic activists and problem solvers. It also allows students to deal with environmental and societal concerns through the built environment, and the development of research, theory and practice. The selection of the neighborhood and organization for the studio project engaged students in collaborating and connecting with an ethnic community and culture that is under-served within the urban context. Working with the community organization, and immersing themselves in the neighborhood allowed students to prepare for future professional activities. The community outreach process, paralleled to the design process, enhanced the rigor of the studio culture.

Ernest Boyer, past president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, wrote,

“higher education must pay much more attention in preparing students to be responsible citizens, and not strictly scholars and professionals. ...The most holistic approach in higher education these days directly links course work to community service.”²

Service Learning reinforces a sense of responsibility towards the community that is critical in the future of architecture education as well as the professional practice. The advantages of Service Learning in the studio far outweigh the disadvantages. The process will result in changing the profession by further evaluating and defining the social responsibility of the architect and the students we educate. By combining theory and application in the studio Service Learning is developed as a model that should be part of all architectural curricula.

NOTES

- 1 Antoniades, Anthony C., *The Poetics of Architecture* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990).
- 2 Boyer, Ernest, *Building Community* (California Princeton Fulfillment Services, Ewing, New Jersey, 1996).

REFERENCES

- 3 Frampton, Kenneth. *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*. Columbia University, School of Architecture, New York, New York, 1987.