

Minding Community: Cultivating a Service-Learning Mindset Between Architecture Schools and Communities

WILLIAM T. WILLOUGHBY
Louisiana Tech University

"Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or a willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good." —*Vaclav Havel*¹

INTRODUCTION: MINDING COMMUNITY

Of all the Southernisms I've adopted, I find "minding" a particularly effective adjective, and "mind" a useful verb.² Most phrases unique to the Southern United States are not only terribly direct, but also profoundly polite. Examples of "mind" abound in everyday speech: "Mind your muddy feet before you mount the porch," or "Mind the latch on the screen door." To tell someone to "mind" something can also be a kindly way of asking another to pay attention to some requirement beyond what they'd normally remember. Telling someone to "mind" means to remind that person of the importance of something easily overlooked.

As architects, we "mind" the details of a porch's construction or we consider the operation of a screen door latch. But when focusing on details, we tend to forget the broader community to which the door latch leads, or the public street beyond the porch steps. Community shapes our most personal nature; and so we always "mind" our community since our mental life is shaped by encounters with community: from experiences at home with family, to school, to workplace, to church. The small town South shuns anonymity and values the life led within a community.

I've lived in North Louisiana for nine years, and I've seen the way in which the School of Architecture at Louisiana Tech University has interacted

with the City of Ruston and Lincoln Parish. Both good will and good works have come about in the last seven years. The School of Architecture has been an engine of social and economic change in the region. Many recent projects that exist today were conceived, designed, and/or built by the professors and students of the School of Architecture. Many yarns could be spun about students' and professors' community involvement. But, swapping "war-stories" never seems to summarize the lessons learned; nor do anecdotes capture any lasting insight into the mindset necessary for community design work.

I have learned that architecture is the result of an entire community pooling, polling, pulling, and sometimes *pushing* together resources in order to build. The singularly rich client with abundant financial resources—who can build whatever or wherever they desire—doesn't readily exist. Community architecture results from cultivating cross-alliances and winning over recalcitrance. Architecture is a stepping-stone to action. Once we wear out a building, or identify a missing social occasion, or seek to rejuvenate and reorganize an institution . . . then architecture steps in. Architects join the community to envision that place where desire meets reality. As architects, we give shape to a community's aspirations.

Who looks at their community with imagination and wonder? . . . the community leader, the architect, and the student. Reticence and entrenched guardedness against change are forces to be reckoned with; but when community-minded people sense support growing toward an unprecedented aim, they ally with those who dare to imagine a better place.

In our context, a three-sided relationship has evolved that supports student learning through service to the community. The mindsets of professors, students, and community members reciprocate with one another when conducting student-centered community service projects. After a seven-year track record, the School's professors and students are readily sought after by community leaders for consultation and community involvement.

We architects nowadays fixate on sculptural objects and daring constructions; we tend to forget the people for whom the places we make are made. On the whole, when we discuss architecture, we overlook the humbling obligation we have to sustain and improve community life. How do we as architects go about "minding" community? Well, with some measure of experience in this matter, I've outlined and described 14 characteristics of the mindset below:

I. Keeping an attitude of diplomacy and reciprocity in all community exchanges

We give while they get. Our compensation comes through the experience we gain when we provide services. Our time, cunning, professional skill, and labor are what we give; in return, we receive the chance to decipher the place-making impulse in clients and help those with real needs . . . students have earnest discussions with clients, strive to satiate a lack, address a need, and offer solutions. This is not a job; it is a promise of action and attention.

Professors and students are ambassadors, diplomats if you will, for the University and the profession of architecture. This may be the first time our client has consumed architectural services—and that client's first experience should be illuminating and competent.

Some clients are pushy; they demand unrealistic deadlines and request more than the students' skill or the School's exposure to legal risk can deliver. These messy situations must be handled with grace and diplomacy. Sometimes walking away, *right away*, from what predicts to be a bad client is the best tactic to take. Risk always exists when working in any community project; but there is also opportunity to learn about architecture as

a *service*—messy, marred by circumstance, and populated by difficult personalities.

It must be understood, up front and by all, that the coequal goals of *establishing an atmosphere of learning* and *providing a necessary service to a client* must not compete against one another, or the latter might hazard to cancel the former goal out. There is a reciprocity between the goal of the professor (to create a unique learning environment that employs the skills of the studio to a service-oriented situation), the expectations of the client (to give substance to a vision or solve a nagging problem), and the varying desires of students (sometimes to serve their community, sometimes to learn something new, sometimes to experience teamwork, and sometimes to just take a class and get a grade).

It is within the triangle of these expectations where diplomatic exchange and the reciprocity of "give and take" is of the essence. But when a client disarms all preconceptions and offers homemade brownies and cold drinks at a meeting, the smiles conjured by good hospitality always helps and *never* appears to hurt—no matter the age of the student (or the professor).

II. Treating each situation as unique; Learning to listen, repeat, and match what is heard with responsive design solutions

Each client and every project is unique; the crisscrossing and cross-purposes of personalities, differences in cultural background, socio-economic status, age, education, diversity of expertise, bravado, humility, earnestness, an anxiousness to proceed, an inability to decide, the frightful ignorance mistaken by some as expertise, blatant forgetfulness and sloth, inordinate demands, and the avarice that can rear its ugly self when someone's getting something valuable for free. This cavalcade of responses to community design makes it essential to listen attentively, to read non-verbal queues and figure out if there is a fit between the character of the client and an opportunity therein for students to learn.

Once a fit is found, then learn to listen. This is one of the basic goals of community design, to see how students can reconfigure the scraps, incomplete shreds, and fragments of a client's ambi-

tions and generate a program that clearly articulates the client's ultimate vision. Each client in the initial meeting is unprepared; and students are not as yet capable of extrapolating what is heard into a rejoining architectural response.

It is also necessary for the faculty member to resist the desire to step in and dictate the direction that client and student should take. There is learning, even for the professors, in the first stages of a project, where expectations are outlined. Different ears hear different needs; learn to listen closely and collaboratively.

III. Serving while not being servile

The crux of all architectural work boils down to this: *we offer a service to clients*. A doctor cannot heal without an ailing body upon which to perform. An architect cannot design without a projected need and a client upon which to practice. Architecture is both noun and verb; but the noun comes to be because the *verb was practiced!*

Architects sustain a practice by serving their clients; the equation is simple, but the in-school opportunities to test the mishaps that occur when serving clients are few. Students of community design learn that the skills they're learning in architectural school—to draw, model and represent; to visualize space, form, scale, and geometry; to problem-solve through a lateral, multi-solution process; to shape complex problems into aesthetically pleasing outcomes; and to think things through from general concepts to specific details—are valuable and unique *instruments of service*.

Students learn that to be able to perform architecture is a vital service that will never be replaced nor diminish as a societal need. Students of architecture are unique and powerful players when seated at the table with clients and consultants. Thus, they must *serve without being servile*.³

It is no simple platitude to say that with exceptional ability comes exceptional responsibility; in the case of community design, issues such as the realities of budget, scope, a client's tolerance for risk, and physical resources impinge on excellence. Excellence is always *squeezed* out of repressive and constraining situations. The commu-

nity designer is responsible for their excellence or their mediocrity.

Architects must lead without being too pushy, and guide without provoking a client's jeers or offence. Architect's must consider the context that defines a particular problem and solve it within its limits. Students learn about their own expertise and why it is not always best to give a client what they say they need; students discover in themselves the means to counter-argue and demonstrate that there exists a diversity of solutions to the same need. By exploring alternatives, designers guide the client to the best overall solution. Through community design, our students learn to offer their services, but just as important, to guide the process.

IV. Leading in ways that truly serve the community's (sometimes unspoken) aspirations

Sometimes a community client has unspoken aspirations, a demand that is just not within their power to articulate. The faculty member, as student advisor, mediator, and guide to the whole process, may sometimes speak from experience and clarify the project's aim. The aspiration of any project must be ferreted out first.

In our School's design studios, students learn the importance of conceptualizing and expressing a concept in their design. Discovering and then defining the unspoken aspiration of the project is the very basis upon which a concept should congeal: and once formed, the imperative should be to express the concept though design. What's mulled over in one's heart may remain hidden; but the actions one commits to are transparent to all.⁴

V. Working with short term goals while keeping in mind the long-term result

The work of the community designer is never wholistic; projects range in scope from a length of fence to portions of a city. Grand and far-reaching changes to a town—parceled out to independently-minded land owners and riddled with diverse stakeholders—is *nigh* impossible. But over time, and with *patience*, a pattern emerges. Each incremental project is one piece of a broader constellation of influence.

One cannot wait for the opportunity to affect broad scale change, it must be grasped first through small opportunities wherein which the foundations of credibility can be laid. The committed doctor cannot heal the citizenry all at once. He or she can see only one patient at a time. The minister cannot attend to the poor in one fell swoop. The poor must be cared for as *individuals* to retain their self-dignity. The community designer must take each project as an opportunity to wrought the good and improve things bit by bit. If the change is for the better and consistent in principle to the overall vision, then long-term results will begin to show through.

We have seen the community come together to first listen to our vision, later to share it, and then long after the initial event—to commandeer our vision and make it their own. The seeds planted by community design take tentative root, sprout shoots, and lead to trees that grow in unexpected ways. The result is a community that becomes self-reflective, a community that thinks about physical change as inevitable and shapeable. We are culpable for our future, and that future can be guided through design.

VI. Compromising on small decisions while advancing broad concerns . . . and recognizing the difference between minor design affectations and keeping true to the big idea

When the detail matters more, the composite effect might never manifest. All projects take on a life of their own. But what *really* matters? Problems always seem to arise when personal design affectations supersede the bigger set of concerns. Community design teaches students what really matters. Details always matter, but compromise is part of the process. What should one compromise on? One learns quickly that if the bigger aims are met, then details will follow along in course. But, if the details are held onto, then the larger gestures within a design may be forfeit.

Is the good designer ever satisfied? No. But, there are service-based techniques for preserving design integrity—such as guiding design from generalities to eventual specifics. We learn with experience what really matters: the distribution of a building on its site, the arrangement of elements

in the program, and the overarching idea behind the design.

VII. Knowing how to be an advocate for good design without alienating community opinion

The role of community designer is as advocate for *good design*. Like an apostle sent abroad to spread the Word, we must leave the commune and convert those ignorant to a better way. Community clients hold a heterodox of views about design. Some think themselves already experts, others approach with trepidation, and most remain indifferent (like in Vittorio De Sica's 1949 film *The Bicycle Thief*: they come for the free meal, but plan to avoid the message).

The goal of all proselytizing is to transform the recipient's vision while not alienating the listener. One must be open to scrutiny, congenial exchange, and make oneself a patient servant to the intelligence of others. The community designer must meet those they wish to assist where they live and embrace the degree to which they can tolerate the message. Good design is forever a conversation between those with the skill and those in need. By involving the client in the process, good design will follow the most direct path and convince those open to the message of the better path to take.

VIII. Knowing when the small details will make a difference and when an ambitious concept is just short of an unrealistic boondoggle

The building will hover above the city like a cloud; we demand that you defy gravity! We join with Melville's Ishmael; his wish and admonishment that, "Would now the wind but had a body; but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents. There's a most special, a most cunning, oh, a most malicious difference!"⁵ The overshoot concept can be a unattainable and bodiless boondoggle, a deranged hunt for something elusive; a goal no one else cares to share.

Details matter. How *this* connects to *that* can charm the observer and save on the maintenance bill. It is essential for a designer to gauge a client's ambition and know that client's needs. To

force forward an overly ambitious concept—or to demand a vision that can never be attained with the given resources—is to act irresponsibly. Also, some details are truly worth the sacrifice; a strategically placed and uncommon door handle, or a canted window can cause a sensation and make the user aware of the fact that they’ve just entered a place with distinctive design. Details make the visitor observant of a quality that goes beyond the norm.

IX. Being positive in the face of negative opposition

Once in a while, we’ve encountered the vocal naysayer. They sometimes speak out of selfish interests, other times out of incredulity and presumption, and once in a while they speak out from fear of change. In each of these circumstances, even when we didn’t prevail, we’ve kept our composure, considered the critique and the lesson it taught, and remained positive. Remaining positive means working with an affable cheer, and never allowing the hope in your heart to waiver in public or turn into anger.

Many will question the actions of the good and the altruistic. The naysayer wonders, what’s in it for you? Why are you doing this? Is there a hidden agenda? Well, the reasons are simple and straightforward: to find new circumstances wherein students learn about the service-side of architecture and the profession, and to make our community better than it would be without our design assistance. The good seeks the best; the best seek the good for all.

X. Being a dreamer while attending to reality’s details

Community clients, with some exceptions, tend never to dream. Designers conjure dreams of the seemingly impossible and then embark on the sticky work of making those dreams possible. Help clients to dream, but to dream with an open eye toward realism. I can think of the dreams that our community design efforts have planted in the minds of our citizens: an enormous community lawn, a beautified vacant corner lot with places for performance during an annual festival, an outdoor classroom, a place for exhibitions, an exceptional house built for someone who couldn’t

afford a personalized design, an amphitheater along a lake, a bridge with seating for lovers and fishers, a town center, a new church that respects the old, a playground for children, a sanctuary for the battered, a renovated theater, a new entrance to the University, a walkable and green campus, a pedestrian bridge, a student achievement center, a fraternity row, a walking trail, and a research park.

These dreams seem simple and ordinary, but each has been either attained or demonstrated to the client as *attainable*. In each of these incremental dreams there is a pattern and an aim, to make a better place of the City of Ruston, Louisiana Tech University, and North Louisiana.

XI. Always demand good design, even if circumstances won’t allow for design to be great

In the end, if the design is *good* (as it always *should* be) and cannot be *great*—due to the time invested, the students’ skills, or the expectations of the client—then we must *accept the good that circumstances allow*. For the designer who pursues excellence above all, this characteristic is the hardest pill to swallow. But in order to serve, one must accept the limitations of the servant. Strive for excellence, but insist on the good.

XII. Being hopeful . . . always hopeful! Carry hope in your heart. As Vaclav Havel once said, “Hope is not a feeling of certainty that everything ends well. Hope is just a feeling that life and work have a meaning.”⁶

As architects, we *project*. And when we project, we focus effort toward the future. Architectural service aims to fulfill first an inkling wish, and later a full-blossomed hope. Vaclav Havel has said that hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Havel gives his own answers on the metaphysics of hope.⁷ But, I know by working to improve our community, that hope is contagious; we bring hope into the world. Hope is part and parcel with all architectural acts. Hope is what gives architecture its basic, intrinsic beauty. Every building makes for a continuity in time. The built begins as an inarticulate need that sparks into existence first as idea. The manifestation of that idea congeals into *hope made material*. We need, we hope, we project, we plan, and we build.

Psychologist James Hillman decried the origination of the Christian paradigm of hope and its historical consequences in the goal-oriented human. Hillman offers the double-pronged caution that if we fixate solely on hope, then we'll only dare to deepen the depths of any despair we encounter.⁸ One must live with the knowledge that disappointment and unrequited desires are forever part of a world fraught with immeasurable contingencies. In spite of any despair over loss there also exists anticipations met, goals attained, hopes fulfilled, and joys found.

Clients respond to the architect who carries hope around in her or his heart. Hope is contagious. It is the first and foremost of human emotions. Without hope, all fails. With hope, anything, even the most trying of circumstances is tolerable. In the words of Viktor Frankl, "The [person] who becomes conscious of the responsibility he [or she] bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him [or her], or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away [their] life. [They] know the 'why' for [their] existence, and will be able bear almost any 'how.'"⁹

Hope offers a "why," channels into our actions, and directs our *élan vital* into works beyond ourselves. To hope is to be selfless; and to be selfless, is to serve. Hope is a state of consciousness, an inner direction within our nature that most cannot imagine living without. Each project an architect undertakes is overwhelming and seemingly without an attainable solution at first; but once we feel a hope for resolution, the work aimed at getting there becomes eased, even enjoyed.

Hope, and at other times the despair of loss, are communal feelings. We *must* hope, but not alone. We hope *together*. We must hold on to hope, in spite of the ancient wisdom of Heraclitus that, "The arc of history is a child building a sand castle by the sea, and this child is the whole majesty of human power in the world."¹⁰

Some designers are driven by their own self-important avarice and aesthetic gluttony. They work solely to please themselves and their aesthetic aims. But I think that most architects recognize that any work of architecture emerges from a constellation of shared hopes, a clutch of aspirations held together in mutuality with

their client. A building does not spring into being without a client (or many clients) and a context. Each client and every designer brings their own "why we are doing this" to the project, and is willing to undertake the arduous "how" to make something manifest.

When we dream of possibilities, we hope; and likewise, hope fuels the search for possibilities. Hope impels us. A person is goaded into service by thoughts of contributing to something larger than the self; in such enterprises, a mutual commitment, a love of results, and a shared fortune are sought. By sharing the hope within our hearts, we multiply the possibility that the best of any alternatives will not only prevail, but remain shared by the majority of any particular project's participants. Hope commits us to seeking out the best of anything and forces all to do something to make it happen. The sharing of hope gives the whole process of community design its effervescent meaning.

XIII. Advancing seemingly complex theoretical ideas with simple practical explanations

We normally do not care to know how our sausages are made; all that really matters is that the links taste good. While in school, we learn arcane theoretical underpinnings for some of the simple ideas we espouse. But like a barrel of crude oil with its impossible amalgam of prehistoric chunks and rare petroleum vapors, architectural theory has the similar consistency of something all mixed and churned. The pitch-laden froth of thinking must be separated, refined, and skimmed off to form a simple substance. The distilled idea can be very clear and very useful, like kerosene or jet fuel—substances that can illuminate or propel us forward. Whereas the untouched barrel of crude is a cumbersome, goopy, and rather useless amalgam.

Students learn fast of the value of keeping theory secret; it only makes sense to untangle our relatively complex theoretical discourses and to lay it out simply and clearly to clients. Theoretical discourse is basic to an architect's understanding of their practice. As Vitruvius laid out in *Book One* of his treatise, theory and practice are intertwined.¹¹ One cannot practice architecture or carry on as an authority without the ability to elucidate the

theory underpinning “the what” and “the why” of one’s discipline.

But on the whole, clients seek answers and solutions to their needs. Longwinded explanations of historical underpinnings, architectural precedents, and theoretical rhetoric seldom discussed outside the classroom or office should be curtailed to laconically simple explanations. The pastor at church does not recapitulate all the Christology they suffered in seminary; what’s important is the simple and lasting message passed on in the sermon.

XIV. Keeping in mind that no matter what the outcome, this endeavor is about student learning and advancing the cause of design literacy in the local community

Though taught intensely about process, architects are trained to be results-oriented. Buildings get built because their designers know how to conjure a complete and detailed vision. It is hard to let go of the result and expound on the *method*. But for the sake of community design, the process takes precedence. Two essential aims motivate all community design and service-learning: that all participants (including students) understand and respond to the belief that *this process is about learning*. This doesn’t suggest that the results of community design are to be dismissed as works by *mere* students, or to consider their work as less-than professional.

No, the aim should be to set up a situation where students learn what cannot be taught in the classroom or the hermetic studio project. Clients must work to make this a nurturing environment where not only will the client personally benefit with a deliverable, but they must also assume the role of co-educator and offer the lay-person’s candid observations. In turn, the community client learns how to converse with architectural professionals, experiences the nuance of the client-architect relationship, learns the jargon associated with the profession, and accepts the benefit of receiving architectural services.

Community design advances the cause of design literacy in the community. A community design center can advertise the importance of physical design within a community. All participants witness

the effort it takes to make a building tailor-made to its purpose, that a work of architecture fits its site like a glove, that there is a unique aesthetic to their city and region, that context matters in design, and that there is not just one solution to any single design problem. Success always seems evident when the client says, “I didn’t know you architects thought about *all* that!” When I hear those words, I chalk one up as a battle won in the war on design illiteracy.

A CONCLUSION; AND A LITTLE MORE ABOUT WHO WE ARE . . .

During the last seven years there has been a maturing of attitudes toward student-centered community service at Louisiana Tech University. The School of Architecture has melded with its immediate community to become an important partner in the evolution of North Louisiana.

We have had multiple audiences and presentations with six mayors from regional cities and towns. We’ve given presentations to our University President and have completed works for every stripe of vice-president and dean at Louisiana Tech University. We’ve worked for Main Street development directors, local church leaders, community non-profits, head parish (aka *county*) librarians, city council members, parish sheriffs, school principals, parish school board members, and city and parish fire chiefs.

This consultancy places the School of Architecture in the sphere of influence in our community. Just about all local decision makers have been involved in our services; we are a part of the physical evolution of our city and campus. Through these connections to leadership, the School of Architecture has served our community; and in concert with these leaders, we’ve *mind*ed community.

As I have said, for seven years various professors, many community leaders, our university administration, six small-town mayors, and the efforts of over 150 students has led to the widely-held view that the School of Architecture is there as a community service resource. We *envision* the physical change in our community in ways others cannot: we have transformed learning into a pro-active opportunity to assist our community and lead those involved to reappraise their place in ways

that would have never been considered without our involvement. From all this, our students learn the transformative power of architecture.

The work architects do goes well beyond that of making delectable objects, or shaping space and form to aesthetic rules . . . architecture is a *service* offered to others who cannot do it for themselves; it is an expertise like effective writing or the power to heal. Architects ascribe a physical vision to collective desires—we provide places for the occasions of life in our community. At every scale, the work of the architect affects the community: our students learn that they never operate in a vacuum, that they are always minding a community whenever they work. This attitude will make them better practitioners since they are always now community advocates seeking group consensus and positive change.

It takes many willing and able hands, coupled together with open and ardent hearts, to raise a village. And we do “raise a village” in much the same communal way in which the Amish might raise a barn. It takes the same love, skills, and commitment of many within a given community to see that the village gets built—and the surest hope that all is done well and for the good of others.

ENDNOTES

1. Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, translated by Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) 181.
2. The obscure word ‘Southernism’ means the distinct phrasing and locution of the Southern United States.
3. A variation on a verse from the oft cited Ronald Duncan poem *The Horse* (composed in 1954); the actual verse goes like this, “He serves without servility; he has fought without enmity.”
4. Guy Davenport explains the heart as being what the Greeks considered the imagination, and what the Hebrews saw as the inner privacy of mind. See his essay, “Wheel Ruts,” from *The Hunter Gracchus* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 1996) 130-131.
5. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967) 511.
6. Quoted in Lance Morrow’s essay, “The Anatomy of Hate,” in *Time Magazine* (Monday, Sep. 17, 1990).
7. See Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, translated by Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) 181.
8. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963) 127.

9. James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975) 98-99.

10. An adjusted translation of Heraclitus; as found in Guy Davenport’s translation, *Seven Greeks* (New York: New Directions Books, 1995) 160.

11. Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, translated by Morris Hicky Morgan (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1960) 5.