

Cumulative Collaboration: A Case That Makes the Case for Design by Collective

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Collaboration amplifies the productivity of a given resource through collective interchange by establishing a complex expertise uniquely positioning the group in a specialized discipline.

ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

As external forces continually reshape the field of architecture and its boundaries, so must architectural curricula respond. Innovation and diverse exploration demand the consideration of architecture beyond its typical context. Redefining and expanding the range of methodologies within architectural education extend the value of the student and faculty experience.

Many architecture projects today are developing overseas in establishing regions such as Dubai and Beijing. These projects are fueled by consumer-driven societies traveling to and growing within these parts of the world. As architectural expression responds to this rapid development, branding is becoming a key component to architectural identity through expansion. Urban planning has continued to infiltrate architectural education elaborating the required collaboration between these two fields. Similarly other design fields have begun to show their implications on architectural design yet have not been incorporated within the educational setting.

“Perhaps the beginning of the twenty-first century will be remembered as the point where the urban could no longer be understood without shopping.”

Project on the City 2: Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping

Herein lies the potential for design implied in the study of the consumer/end-user and retail environments. The limited exploration of this within current educational settings reduces a student’s ability to develop an understanding of the consumer as end-user and their impact within the design and transformation of our urban environments. Architectural thought must look beyond architecture at design and other fields that today are showing a continued and greater impact within our built environment. The continued development of the built environment relies on the emotional connection between the consumer and design.

This paper illustrates a retail exploration experience within the undergraduate studio setting, allowing students to collaborate with each other and extend their design abilities beyond their existing knowledge. This enables students to develop innovative solutions to the problems at play within our own consumer society, focusing largely on Middle America and what it means to be a central retailer in an emotionally-driven, consumer society.

CAPTURING CREATIVE VALUE: SPONSORED STUDIOS

The failure of an educational studio to provide collaborative experiences inhibits the speed at which a student adapts to a professional setting. Within architectural curricula both in lecture and studio formats, teaching efforts often focus on individual design and independent exploration by a single student. This methodology obscures the collaborative atmosphere of the design professions. Students at

our university are exposed to collaborative environments through the cooperative education [co-op] program in which students enter the professional setting as a component of the required curriculum. Co-op experiences begin during the second year of the curriculum and afford students an understanding of the realities of professional collaboration. After having been exposed to the collaborative nature of the profession, students this collaborative pursuit is exchanged for an individualized studio experience. The strictly individualized education pursuit discourages the discourse between the professional experience and education within the studio experience.

A sponsored collaborative studio necessitates that students work with one another and with diverse professors. In this case it also afforded an unprecedented interaction between students and industry executives of a fortune 500 company. This collaborative experience directly complimented the students' cooperative education. In the co-op model there is a direct reciprocal exchange, on the job training in exchange for aspiring new talent. One of the greatest values in partnerships, such as this one, between the college and businesses is nearly impossible to quantify—inspiration.



Figure 1. Straight to the top. Students engage the CEO of the sponsor company.

The introduction of a client within the studio setting provides the student and faculty the opportunity to increase the control of the design process. The product of the studio becomes increasingly focused as the final product cannot simply be a result of individual likes and dislikes but instead must additionally include acknowledgment of the client's needs, wants, likes, and dislikes. This provides the

limitations that exist within the professional setting yet still allow the student to design as a student, without bias and without solely focusing on pleasing the client, as can occur in a professional environment. The student must address the intentions of the client but is still able to treat the project as his own and direct it towards the end goal of the development and refinement of the personal student's design process. Even though the end product must be derived from the client, the sponsored studio's main focus is on the individual development of the student within his educational setting.

Sponsored studios provide the opportunity for students to engage contemporary discourse through a level of research beyond the traditional design studio. The possibility that a student's work and research in a sponsored studio will be used for the further development of a real project provides a level of fulfillment that a student cannot gain from a typical studio. A traditional studio allows the student to complete a project, which they believe has achieved a level of refinement, yet the project, unless submitted for a competition, will not gain exterior exposure and praise. Herein lies the distinction in the student's stimulation from the sponsored studio. The external party sponsoring the studio gains creative insight from the students. The designs developed are created without bias, in which a hired design strives to please the client, but instead the students use the opportunity to further develop ideas through access to additional resources, knowledge, and challenges. Sponsored studios have become common within design fields outside of architecture and interior design, such as industrial design. This is linked to the marketability and manufacturability of a design product of limited physical scale, yet much can be gained from collaboration between students, faculty, and professionals within the architectural field.

A VISIONARY CASE FOR IMPACTING MASS CONSUMPTION

In one yearlong, sponsored effort, a total of 66 students from interior design, architecture and product development explored new strategies in big-box-retail, including integrating environmentally responsible innovations. At the end of each quarter, the students presented their findings to the sponsor and forwarded their output to the next student group to expand and refine. In the process, every

student presented to executives of a Fortune 500 retailer. And one of the studios presented their recommendations directly to the CEO. At the request of our sponsoring partner, the students provided a design brief to the sponsors contracted design firm. This inverted the co-op relationship; students were providing direction to the masters. For our external partner, the collective served as a **neutral critic**, an **aspirational client**, and an **uninhibited think tank** for both the sponsor and later for its design agencies.

The sponsorship provided the opportunity for undergraduate students to work in groups ranging from 10 to 30 students across two different departments in the college. The integrated research and design process was led by faculty in architecture, interior design, fashion design, and product development along with feedback and mentoring from faculty in the college of business and from professionals within complimentary design disciplines. The anticipated goal of the year long exploration was a complete proposal for the company offering the compilation and synthesis of retail and market research, analysis of retail design and trends, strategy for the company brand, as well as new store layouts and design proposals through multiple iterations.

The following case describes the process and outcomes of the one-year-long collaboration between the university and the sponsor company. The process was divided into four separate and distinct studio experiences, each ten weeks long,

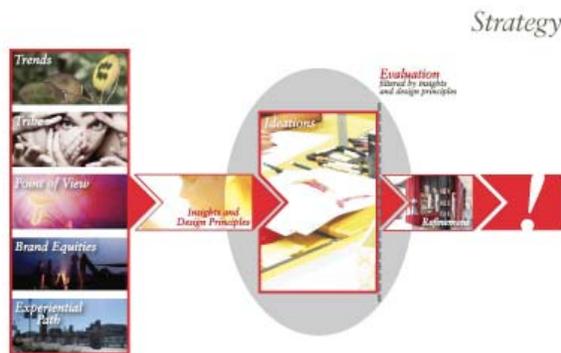


Figure 2. Common methodology unifying the effort.

leading to their own observations on current retail design and future trends. Knowledge accumulated from the previous studio was synthesized to

further the discoveries from one studio to the next, culminating in a final strategy presented by the students to leading executives of the company, including its CEO.

GROUP EFFORT: THE CUMULATIVE COLLABORATIVE STUDIO

This sponsored studio, one of the first of its magnitude at the university, challenged the typical restraints of the studio format. An immediate distinction of the studio is that no problem statement was defined for the students to resolve in the ensuing ten weeks. Instead, the process began with initial research assignments determined by the faculty, in order to demonstrate the framework for directing the design. The pedagogical structure of the studio evolved collaboratively allowing students, through their own research, to develop and determine the direction of the studio. Enabled by the sponsored funding, the students and faculty traveled regionally and nationally in order to document, record, and develop an understanding of multiple retail environments including, those of the sponsor, its immediate competitors, and other retail leaders.

Discovery | Summer 2006

The inaugural studio in the summer of 2006 was heavily research based, involving both primary and secondary sources of investigation within the retail environment. Students conducted personal interviews with multiple stakeholders offsite at leading retail centers. The results gained from this research aimed to identify leaders in the retail industry and to define why they are in that position, leading to questions such as, how a retailer located in the middle/center can engage in architecture and design services to move beyond its competitors and towards the forefront of its industry.

Research methods also included field visits both locally and nationally to catalogue retail experiences and trends of the most influential names in the industry. The students established their own framework for research through observation and through the development of interviews with management level retailers, employees, and consumers. Through these investigations the students uncovered the historical trajectory of the company over the last 100 years from a frontier general store, to the hey day of the mail order

catalogue, to the current transition in retail towards an holistic experience focused on the emotional demands of consumers.

Iterative study led to the gathering of information, which was presented to four executives of the sponsoring company. Six main categorical areas of



Figure 3. Twelve summer studio students set the above agenda for the ensuing 9 months and for 54 of their peers.

research included: the *Golden Rule*, the *Big Box Store*, *Luxury vs. Convenience*, the *Product*, *Retail Identity*, and *Sustainability*. The final presentation involved a gallery exhibit providing for a creative representation of the research completed by the students over the three month period, providing for graphic, verbal and video depictions of the current state of retail and branded environments.

Strategy | Autumn 2006

Autumn 2006 built upon the summer outputs by developing an overall strategy for brand and retail design. Influenced by the recent discussions of the emotional impact of brand and consumer identification with retailers, the students modeled the entire experiential process within the retail setting. This investigation involved the fewest number of students—ten (10)—who all worked in unison throughout the entire quarter. Contrary to a typical studio, the students did not begin by addressing architectural precedents but instead looked to establish a feedback loop for evaluating design decisions.

The completion of the autumn studio provided design principles for executing future, consumer-centric iterations of shopping environments. The

impact of the studio relied on further discovery of the students based on the previous students research. This cumulative collaboration furthered the depth of analysis, which created a more specific and effective retail analysis framework easily addressing the complexities involved in rebranding and repositioning the sponsor company.

Translation | Winter 2007

Inheriting six months of background research on retail environments, brand design, and company equities, the students of Winter 2007 authored a design strategy to articulate design proposals for execution across a breadth of scale. The collaboration of this studio involved both small group and overall teamwork and included the largest number of students—29—increasing the challenge of working collectively. Sustainability, having been previously mentioned within the other quarters was increasingly emphasized during the winter. As iterative store proposals were developed, the students created a new, future consumer profile. (The company initially presented the students with the its targeted consumer profiles.) The proposed, younger consumer was environmentally conscious and placed demands on the company to acknowledge her lifestyle choices.

The 29 students, emphasizing sustainability from their initial exposure with company employees, were beginning to see the impact of their work. The ex-



Figure 4. Student defined future clientele.

ecutives began to respond extremely positively to the students' ideas expressing their interests in pro-

viding a sustainable future for the company. A digital presentation focused on many aspects of increasing the consumer-centric design principles of the company while also proposing design concepts that would place the company ahead of its competitors.

Synthesis | Spring 2007

For the final quarter of this yearlong collaboration, a studio of thirty students divided into 4 teams with each developing its own concept for a pop-up store. Prior to the beginning of this collaboration, the company executives had defined for the students the key demographics of their customer. The students continually challenged this parameter by presenting options for a younger demographic, including college students and young professionals. (The resonance of these decisions can be seen in tone of the company's current media.)

The teams developed distinct temporary, pop-up stores to be located on college campuses. Each

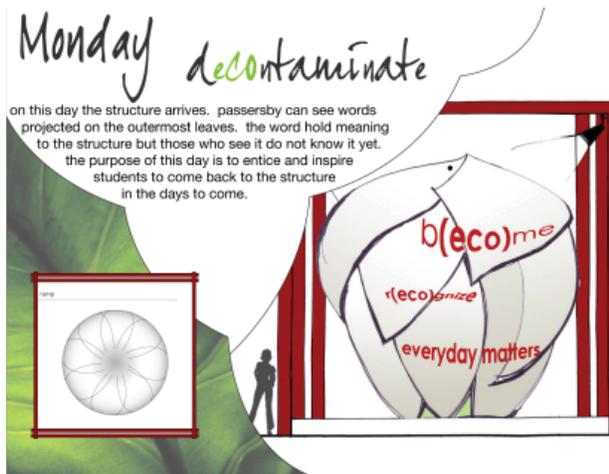


Figure 5. Proposal for sustainable, campus pop-up retail kiosk.

emphasized sustainability as a force for attracting younger customers. The students leveraged their own experiences as members of this demographic group to effectively personalize the proposals. Designing beyond the environments themselves, the students, using technology and media driven approaches created educational campaigns as well as mass consumable environments adaptable to a variety of university settings.

MEANINGFUL EVALUATION

The typical studio evaluation process involves a main presentation—pin-up—around the middle of the term, along with a final pin-up, during week ten. Intermediately, between these formal presentations, the student is often involved in a continuous dialogue with her professor in the form of desk critiques. During the formal critiques, guest architects and interior designers are invited from both inside the faculty and from local firms to provide insight into the proficiency of the student projects. While this forum is extremely helpful in the development of the students' presentation and evaluation skills, it lacks some of the specific focus that can be gained from the sponsored studio. Often the guest critics may be very knowledgeable on the typology of the project yet are uninformed about the site, its restrictions and potentials, and the scope of the project. This creates limitations in the value of the discourse between the student and critics. Even though much can be gained in the discussion of the value of the design and process, the specificity of the commentary is lost due to a disconnect in the understanding of the depth of analysis within the 10 week design.

The sponsored studio eliminates the gap created between the student and evaluator for the evaluator becomes the client. This client offers the initial knowledge of the company goals and expectations, allowing the student to derive the process of the design from these initial discussions. The student of the sponsored studio becomes continuously involved in the discourse with the client. As the design and research processes develop, the student relies less on the client for the direction and focus of her project and research yet can engage in a discussion on the specificities within the project. The student has the ability to ask questions of the client and in turn, through the client's answers, can increase the project efficacy for serving both the student and client needs.

This experience offered four (4) main checkpoints throughout the yearlong effort. These checkpoints varied in format but relied on a formal presentation delivered exclusively by the students to the executives of the sponsoring company followed by a casual seminar and discussion between the executives, the students and the lead faculty.

Not only did students benefit from presenting directly to industry executives and clients, the sponsor

gained an outside perspective and analysis of the company's image from a neutral demographic that the company was not striving to address and attract with its new positioning. (Copies of the presentation were taken back to its corporate headquarters and distributed among management.)

BENEFITS TO STUDENTS

A studio environment, especially the short time span of a ten-week studio, usually does not allow for a high level of research. The time restraint and need to produce a finalized design resists the ability for the student to spend large amount of time doing research and observation work. A collaborative sponsored studio provides for this opportunity. Ranging from 10 to 30 students the research power of the students is increased and the students explore many more related channels. Continuous collaboration between the students provide for a very animated and dynamic studio environment in which knowledge and discovery create an atmosphere of excitement that both furthers the depth of understanding and fosters a high level of creativity.

Students remain critical ambassadors to new and longstanding relationships in the college's network of research and curricular collaborators. Among the benefits we strive to sustain through stewarding our valued partnerships are:

- leadership development in our students on top of knowledge and skills acquisition
- continuity of learning—there is tremendous empowerment for students to generate peer study vessels
- peer-to-peer teaching
- resources of sponsored projects to support student efforts and provide additional learning opportunities through travel or visiting experts
- keep faculty connected with the practice of their disciplines

For the student, one of the most beneficial outcomes of the collaborative research environment is process that evolves from the original project proposal and challenge to the development of a position on an argument pertinent in the design discourse. This research process provides benefits for future projects as the student develops their identity as a

design through a research based process.

Excerpts from Student Responses to Collaborative, Sponsored Studio Evaluations

What have been your challenges?

"Learning to think about and approach our problems differently."

How has this class been different from previous studios?

"It's opened me up to different methodologies and ways of approaching design...it required layers upon layers of (group) brainstorming to produce the strong ideas we have now..."

Please share your feelings regarding the teamwork evidenced in the studio:

"All major output was created by a collaborative of people."

"I was impressed with the way everyone worked together—it was quite stimulating for discussions."

What did you learn in this collaborative?

"To approach designing [sic] methods in different ways through diagrams, brainstorming and collaborating..."

"A different way of thinking about the beginning process of design..."

As stated earlier the benefits of a sponsored studio can often far outweigh those that can be achieved within the typical studio environment. The student faces the opportunity and challenge of completing work for a client yet also the creative freedom to react to the particular situation within the academic setting. This provides the benefit for the student to get exposure to a professional atmosphere exposing them to the benefits and constraints of client directed work. This exposure leads to the students benefit when exposed to future employment.

VALUE TO SPONSORING PARTNER

The client pursuing the outcome of a sponsored

studio is also faced with challenges and opportunities. Although expecting some return on its investment, an external sponsor is less likely to have a preconceived notion of the outcome of the studio. The students, not needing to fully satisfy or comply with the client's demands, have the ability to go beyond the client expectation. In this case study, the students challenged the current market sector for which the company positioned themselves. During the first quarter of this collaboration, summer of 2006, the company stated in the project brief that its demographic included women 35 to 55 and their younger children. The students initially also conceived the company within this demographic. However, following site visits and observations of retail environments and websites, the students began to question this restrictive market segment. Immediately they began to create new customer profiles that included college aged students and young professionals. These profiles have infiltrated the repositioning of the company and are reflected in recent changes made by the company, such as its new advertising campaign, the addition of a line of environmentally responsible products, and the creation of a college dorm line. The students' honesty in delivering their research and strategic overview to the sponsor's executives led to a variety of design concepts that question the current positioning of the company and provoked their investment in positive changes for the future.

SO HAPPY TOGETHER

The relationships among multiple colleges at the university and with distinguished outside partners are indicative of an increased complexity in real world problems that both graduates AND undergraduates engage through design education at the college. And they have certainly provided me as a faculty with opportunities for development unmatched in any of my previous enterprises—academic or professional. (A great asset for our design programs is that the college is housed within a comprehensive university where we can quickly access professional expertise in nearly any field of endeavor, including medicine.)

Collaborative learning extends the capabilities of students beyond the assimilation of disciplinary knowledge, enabling them to generate new meaningful insights that inform innovative solutions. Incorporating that methodology into design curricula has broader educational implications, providing students with a transferable process that can be utilized in their diverse academic and professional encounters. The issues encountered in collaborative projects are indicative of new trajectories in university education that respond

to the matrix of challenges facing students in our global community.

We continue to actively seek dynamic new external relationships for the schools' faculty and students. And we are all working in our classrooms, studios



Figure 6. All confident smiles before pitching to the CEO.

and research centers to overcome such challenges to partnering as:

- Coordinating distinct and sometimes disparate accreditation standards
- Sole authorship and traditional expectations of the tenure evaluation process
- Limited time on a quarter schedule (10 weeks) to coordinate logistics

The final presentations of future studios involved a board room report catered to a few upper level executives where the students through the research and analysis efforts were able to position themselves as retail consultants, understanding the complexities of emotional brand integrity and its impact on the consumer relationship. The strategic understanding of the retail and brand experience led to a concrete yet adaptable framework for value generation within retail design. By establishing a formal framework for generating and evaluating design decisions the students were able to present the sponsor with valid iterations of consumer-centric shopping environments based on experiential paths and the consumer moment of truth as a basis for value driven design.

The collaboration within the studio environment allowed for a deep development of ideas and initial design concepts. The diversity of ideas led to creative alternatives to the design problem at hand. The students spent time filtering and enriching ideas collectively and developed proposals with a greater likelihood to be implemented than those created by an individual student. The students collectively assessed the value of proposed ideas

and discovered possible alternatives to them, which through the collaborative effort were advanced to highly effective and applicable solutions.

The students within the studio environment were faced with a professional challenge that has yet to be solved. Branding initiatives have taken control of the current marketing campaigns of growing companies yet, as this is a dynamic part of a field still in early development there have not been established a well studied and tested strategies for successful implementation. This gap within the design approach invigorates the students and faculty involved with the studio and provides that all ideas put on the table should be considered as a valid approach for the process of solving the consumer-centric retail challenge.

ENDNOTES

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Figure 7. Cover from the final document presented by students to the design agencies contracted by the sponsor.