

Studio: DetroitHS

Craig L. Wilkins
University of Michigan

Studio: DetroitHS is an integrated architectural exploration program designed for highly motivated high school students traditionally under-represented in the field. It is a unique opportunity for interested Detroit area juniors and seniors to learn about and explore the possibilities of a career as an architect. Despite a history in the building professions that dates back to the 17th century, African-Americans are still extremely under-represented in the study and practice of architecture. Experts in the field have concluded that in general, students of color often don't receive the same exposure to the profession of architecture and therefore simply don't recognize it as a career option. This is especially true in Detroit, where there's only 1 high school out of 34 in the entire city that has an architectural curriculum.

Studio: DetroitHS is a semester-long course, meeting twice a week for 2½ hours each, for 16 students. The curriculum is designed to encourage individual exploration and creative growth by helping each student to develop a high level of problem-solving ability through practical design applications, taking a hands-on approach to the study of architecture through the integration of studio work, educational field trips, seminars and lectures. Strategies for introduction, recruitment and retention at the high school level include, but are not limited to:

- Design Studio: Students work both collaboratively and individually in an open office-like environment with instructors, professional, visitors, mentors and each other to produce architectural ideas, drawings, models and projects.

- Office, University and City Tours: Students tour Detroit and travel to Chicago to spend a week-

end doing the same. In addition, students visit 3 of the 4 schools of architecture in the area to talk with students, advisors, and administrators about the school and its program.

- Mentors: We assist students to develop supportive and tutorial ties between future and existing professionals.

The primary goals of Studio: DetroitHS are to 1) expose African-American youth to the profession of architecture and thereby increase the number choosing to pursue careers as architects and 2) serve the under-represented communities of the Detroit Metro area through the provision of educational and architectural services.

The nature of the collaboration

Each year the program students are given a project with familiar conditions and real world applications. In January, the class took on the problem of designing a new playground and activity structures for the John Trix Elementary School.

The redesign was necessitated by the size, poor drainage and safety concerns of its current location, all of which severely limited the ability of the students at Trix to enjoy outdoor activities.

Over a 15-week period, the program students researched the project, surveyed the site, built models, visited the school several times to ascertain the needs of the student body and to work collaboratively with the faculty, staff, students and parents of Trix as well as with graduate students and team



members in the studio to individually and collectively create several concepts of an exercise friendly playground area.

After several iterations and critiques, they brought their final design to a public presentation at Trix Elementary/Middle School, which included a model of the entire school and playground site as well as individual models of each new piece of equipment designed by the students.

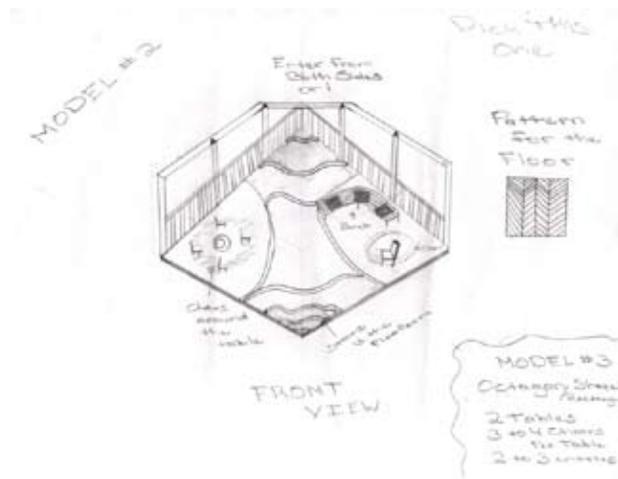
The project was extremely well received; so much so that Principal Wes Ganson decided to solicit funds to implement the design concept, which, with design assistance from the Detroit Community Design Center and financial, material and/or labor donations from Home Depot, the State of Michigan, University of Michigan College of Architecture + Urban Planning, the Osborn community, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, among others, is currently under way.



Demonstrate what students learned

The assessment of program benefits is immediate and tangible. The studio curriculum provides the HS students with several national and state arts education components.

On the national level, the students learn to understand and apply media, techniques, and processes, use knowledge of structures and functions in order to make decisions about a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.



Upon the completion of their studio project, students reflect upon and assess the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others. These specific skills are also part of the primary goal set of the State of Michigan Merit Curriculum for Visual, Performing, and Applied Arts as well. In addition, the program students develop an ability to formulate and articulate a case for the results of an artistic/creative process as the correct fulfillment of specific client requirements in presentations to parents, clients and other stakeholders. There are also other not-so-immediate goals that we aim to engender as well, which are demonstrated as a further desire to continue exploring a career in the physical design and further still is simply the enhanced appreciation for the profession of architecture or any creative endeavor.

Finally, an appreciation for the history of African-Americans in the profession of architecture specifi-

cally, but the various fields of design in general can be expected, not only for the participating students, but the general public as well. Of the 30 program graduates, 10 are either currently enrolled in an architecture program or planning to transfer to one in the near future.



How the community benefited

The program has two primarily "communities": 1) DPS students, 91.35% of which (89.23% African American, 7.12% Latino) are considered underserved in this disciplinary field and 2) the surrounding neighborhood residents, community centers, K-8 and ancillary organizations located in the various neighborhoods where the final artwork is placed. The case of the former has been covered in great detail above. In the case of the latter, the neighborhood will soon have a new, usable playground and community activity space where one didn't exist before serving 523 Trix Elementary/Middle School students and approximately 14,331 Osborn residents under 18 years old; a space designed by local kids of color between the ages of 7 and 17 who now have a glimpse of the possibilities that a career in architecture might provide both them and their community that they arguably would not have received anywhere else in the city.