

# Pursuing the Urban Mission: The Inner City Studio Experience

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the structure and purpose of the Inner City Studio, an alternative model for urban Schools of architecture which can help enhance their teaching, research and service missions. It ensures a consistent, high quality level of outreach to communities in a way that strengthens the educational experience of the student, as well as reinforcing the role of a school within its urban context.

## THE URBAN CONTEXT

A problem facing all Schools of Architecture is the degree to which 'real world' projects could or should be integrated into the curriculum along with theoretical knowledge to provide a balanced educational package. The theory/practice debate, which is unlikely to be solved any time soon, is even more keenly focused in Schools located in major cities, where an implicit or stated 'urban mission' creates a professional obligation both to involve school members in community related issues and to arm students with the skills and knowledge necessary for them to practice effectively in urban situations. These Schools, while benefiting from their location in a number of ways—sizable local profession, a range of studiable urban prototypes etc.—are often in or near neighborhoods or communities which have serious problems to address within their physical surroundings, and yet may have limited resources with which to deal with them.

## 'REAL-WORLD' EXPERIENCE'

Activities likely to be undertaken by Schools include faculty participation on task forces and committees, or pro bono work for community or neighborhood groups. The latter, sometimes being on the so-called 'margins of society,' may find it impossible to be able to pursue projects through traditional design services due to a lack of adequate funding or organizational expertise. Many of these projects are scheduled into studio curricula at both the graduate and undergraduate levels as a means whereby students can gain exposure to existing problems, interact with real client groups and ultimately prepare designs which may help to

generate improvement in the inner city.

The scheduling of community-based issues into both studios and courses can be a time consuming but worthwhile task, creating an integrated curriculum reflecting the urban nature of the program. Each problem provides the students with a number of advantages. A real site, a real client group who can be canvassed for opinions, requirements and detailed information and, of course, feedback on the finished work. It also creates some real restraints in the form of locally applicable laws and regulations, financial limitations, and the dynamics of neighborhood politics.

While it is fair to say that relatively few student projects actually reach fruition, the major benefits of school involvement, in addition to the enrichment of the students' education, lie in less tangible fields of neighborhood motivation, the stimulation of ideas, the generation of alternatives, the building of consensus and the creation of impetus for action. In many instances, the work of a student group has created sufficient interest in the project to ensure that the community group moves forward with seeking funding opportunities and engaging city officials to a point where conventional architectural or planning services are engaged. Thus, the School can serve both the needs of focusing a community's needs while ultimately helping to create work for the local professions.

## LIMITATIONS TO EXISTING MODELS

However, while this is an excellent model that mutually satisfies the needs of the community and the urban mission of the university, it has its limitations. Only a few projects can be slotted into a busy curriculum each year, so a number of worthy community requests may have to be turned down. Additionally, the quality of work, particularly in lower level studios, is unpredictable and, while perhaps answering the needs of the fledgling student, may not be physically or financially practicable in reality. Thus, the outreach component of an urban school may be sporadic in its delivery and inconsistent in its quality. In both cases, the expectations of the community group in approaching the School may not be met on a uniformly acceptable basis.

The need to establish an ongoing profile within the city, tempered by the limitations of the curriculum, the students, the continued interest of the faculty, and the challenging and expanding demands of the rest of the curriculum has led the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee to develop an alternative model of service-based design, entitled the “Inner City Studio.”

### THE INNER CITY STUDIO

The goal of the Inner City Studio is to integrate the teaching, research and outreach functions of the School in alignment with the urban context and mission, and thereby create a service function that both enriches the students’ education, while delivering a high-quality, consistent design voice within the local communities. It is conceived as an urban “swat team,” on call to deliver fast, effective solutions on a year-round basis.

Working originally from a grant won from the University of Wisconsin System, the Inner City Studio was created to build upon and expand existing achievements within the School, and to make the whole array of urban-focused activities greater than the sum of its individual parts. To this point, faculty had been diligent in their personal outreach activities and had brought projects into the studios where possible. The Inner City Studio regularized this process, providing funding to either buy out faculty from some teaching responsibilities to enable them to concentrate on community projects, or to publish or exhibit the results of their work, thus feeding into the research/scholarly activity requirement which they undertake. Products thus far have included a number of articles in scholarly and professional magazines, locally organized exhibitions, publications and a number of service-related awards. While these are secondary to the immediate purpose of the Inner City Studio, they do help faculty to fulfill their broader academic mandate (upon which tenure, promotion and pay raises are after all based) and to provide some incentive to maintain their ability to focus on service-oriented work.

The regularization of the process within the format of the Inner City Studio involved the filtering of most new projects through a single source within the School, and the switching of projects either to appropriate studios, courses or faculty for their review and possible adoption. If no openings were available or the nature of the proposed project was incompatible with current pedagogic needs, it would be folded into the backup studio, or Inner City Studio, where selected graduate students (who were paid from the grant) would work on them.

The advantage of the additional Inner City Studio, staffed on an ‘as-needed’ basis by outstanding graduate students, has meant that the quality of work is consistently high and that there are few of the time lags experienced with waiting for

a studio slot to open—most community requests come with a short time line for delivery, which makes them difficult to fit into the usual semesterly curriculum. In the last year, inner city groups representing African American, Hispanic and Hmong communities, as well as the Black Veterans Association and several other inner city neighborhood groups have benefited from the students’ work, while the latter have developed valuable skills in community advocacy and inner city design. Work with the Native American Heritage Center has also recently begun.

Based upon the success of the pilot program, subsequent funding was won from two local Foundations, the Milwaukee Foundation and the Gardner Foundation. The former has just renewed its commitment for a second year and another foundation is currently considering further support. The externally generated support is critical to the success of the Inner City Studio to pay the hand-picked students (faculty continue to work on a pro-bono basis as a part of their service obligation), and support has also been forthcoming from grants from the Department of City Development and local corporations wishing to share the task of improving the urban condition in Milwaukee.

### SUMMARY

Most recently, the Inner City Studio has received the 1995 Community Partnership Award, an honor shared by the six faculty and twelve students involved, and will be funded this year by a national housing institute and a local developer to develop standardized prototypes for urban infill housing for both Milwaukee and other urban centers nationwide.

While probably not an entirely original model of urban outreach, the combination of traditional studio involvement coupled with the urban “swat team” on call throughout the year creates a systematic process within the School for methodically addressing projects which are brought in or which are identified as needing attention. The consistency and quality of delivery is much less sporadic than in former years, and the collective impact of the work ensures that the profile of the School, and therefore University, is much more in evidence in the city, enhancing its credibility, reputation and, ultimately, usefulness as a catalyst for physical change. The benefits are universal; the communities receive free design advice, faculty gain the opportunity to fulfill their research and service roles while enriching their teaching, and the students receive the opportunity to tackle real world problems within the academic context. Every effort continues to be made to ensure that continued funding (currently no more than \$30,000 a year) allows the Inner City Studio to continue to be a valuable component of the Schools’ program, and may be a useful model for other schools located in major urban areas.