

Serendipity in the City: Service Learning and Architectural Studies: The Gateway Service Learning Project

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INTRODUCTION

For each home ground we need new maps, living maps, stories and poems, photographs and paintings, essays and songs. We need to know where we are, so that we may dwell in our place with a full heart.

— Scott Russell Sanders

The marriage of service learning and architectural education rises naturally from the commitment to care about the spaces we inhabit. The extent to which we see our “place” as an integral element of our personal well-being, a necessary dimension of an integrated self engages students and their teachers in a shared dialogue about why the shape of the built environment matters. The subcontext of my classes on architecture is an emphasis on active involvement in community life, the development of a greater awareness of the significance of the physical environments we inhabit, the social responsibility that comes with education and the way public activity can enrich the educational process.

In architecture classes, we talk about historical styles and patterns, about the cultural and contextual forces that shaped form, about structure and technology. As we pull these issues into the context of place outside the classroom, we can help students identify the most public and fundamental sources of community. When we take our discussion out of the classroom or studio and tie it to dialogue about urban stories—whether real estate developments in the other side of town, issues about homeless shelters or pricey condominium warehouse renovations, the lives around us start to matter more. Students can see where they fit into the pictures and narratives we spin. They begin to form identification with neighborhood, with community.

Perhaps the most perilous position an educator can arrive at is one in which curriculum is so compartmentalized, even simplified that it is disengaged from the real life around us. We forget the context where stories are played out. We forget how to feel the pulse of life or why the subjects we are teaching matter.

Regardless of the complications service learning can introduce into the curriculum, the challenges that it immediately creates offers as well the potential for testing the viability of our ideas, measuring the validity of our theories, and providing students with the opportunities to establish connections and commitments that are based on experience. Here our ideas can be met, perhaps affirmed, certainly challenged, broadened and held accountable.

TARGET NEIGHBORHOOD

In the cultural and spatial homogeneity of the consensual environment of Salt Lake City, the Gateway District, the west side of the

city, the warehouse district, was historically extraordinarily diverse—ethnically, economically, religiously, and in terms of its social life the antithesis of the rest of the city. Here street life was pungent with the aroma of garlic, of traditions and stories fresh from the journey west. Immigrant families crowded into second story apartments over Greek restaurants, Japanese laundries or Italian stores that sold exotic products for ethnic cuisine. In total, this created a rich history that bred on diversity—multi-culturalism, pluralism, and certainly a life apart. The line that divided the two parts of the city was sharply drawn and almost impossible to cross.

In the 1960s and 1970s, almost one hundred years after the railroad came into Salt Lake City, much of the physical fabric of the ethnic diversity was bulldozed in the path of development—the Salt Palace Convention Center, downtown parking lots, industrial complexes functionally obliterated remnants of the cultural diversity of the west side. What had historically been known as “Japanese Town” for instance, was after 1970 black top-sweeping, anonymous fields that defied historical interpretation.

In the 1990s the Gateway District became the focal point of private and public plans for development—an opportunity to put a new “face” on Salt Lake City, a “gateway” into a city struggling for redefinition. When in 1995 Salt Lake City secured the bid for the 2002 Olympics, it raised the odds in the debate over development in the Gateway District. In 1994, the Gateway was a fairly loosely defined concept, a vision for turning around an area officially designated a “blight” zone, a brown space. Buildings stood vacant, empty reminders of more vibrant and active times. Fields crisscrossed by railroad tracks, long since relevant stretched like farm fields—urban open space that held different promise for the Mayor, developers, community activists, and the homeless who wandered from shelter to shelter on Salt Lake City’s west side.

Since that time, Gateway property escalated from ten to fifteen percent annually and was in hot demand. A particular focal point of Mayor Dee Dee Corridini, the shape of this area which included blocks between 300 West and Interstate 15 and North Temple and 10th South was up for grabs. One developer, the Boyer Company’s proposed Gateway project included five story buildings, plazas, rooftop gardens, and first floor shops; theaters, a planetarium and a museum, hotels and apartment buildings promised revitalization and a “historic” flavor reminiscent of the area’s past.

But in the dialogue over change, the presence of the powerless—the homeless, the minority and low-income resident population were stunningly absent. The historical population had been rendered obsolete and insignificant.

Here then, was a unique opportunity to learn through direct experience in an area of the city in the process of dramatic change through investigation, interviewing, research, problem solving and learning to empathetically see through another’s point of view. It

was the objective of this project that this type of learning would help build community and make the curriculum of our classes more socially responsive.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

The way to study people is not from the top down or the bottom up, but from the inside out, from the place where people are articulate to the place where they are not.

— Henry Glassie

This project centered on a dual objective: 1) to help the voices of the inhabitants of the Gateway district be included in the dialogue over change; and, 2) to help preserve a record of the area's historic richness and ethnic diversity. The projects as a group create a tangible record, a data base for use by the neighborhood, and expose students to the process of involvement in the community and see the role they can play in community life. Acknowledging that this was a brief experience at best, my agenda was to help students forge a connection to community and make a commitment to community service and to teach the processes of community involvement.

The Gateway Service Learning Project brought students from three different architecture classes of three different levels into the community to study a place under rapid and intense change, to observe how that process of change occurred in the past and in the present and its affect on the lives of human beings involved. The three classes were: Introduction to Architecture, a freshman General Education course taught in an auditorium with a typical student population of three hundred and fifty students; Utah Architecture, a graduate level architectural history class which includes a population of about thirty Historic Preservation students and Design students; and, an Honors class for non-majors, senior students called "The Image of the City: Architecture in the Urban Environment of fifteen students. Each class had its own complications and difficulties as well as its unique rewards.

The data gathered from the various research and service projects was collected and published for distribution to local public agencies, institutions and individuals involved in development of the Gateway area. Furthermore, the way the projects examined community networks, power sources and the way power was used created a methodology that could in the future be applied to other urban neighborhoods.

There was a sense of immediacy to this project because the area was the focus of one of the most ambitious and sweeping efforts to "remake" a part of the city in recent memory. The Mayor, numerous wealthy entrepreneurs and other developers catapulted the Gateway District into public prominence as a focal point for growth and development. The historic ethnic character of the neighborhood, the impact on local inhabitants, and the future direction this change would take was still debatable and was in important ways a test of community values and beliefs. This project asked students help engage the disenfranchised in the process and themselves become engaged in the dialogue, to recognize the rich cultural and ethnic history of the area before it became invisible in the name of progress. As a group the individual service learning projects were linked to the curriculum, to each other and to the community. Sharing the same objectives, they related to and built upon each other in the three separate classes in the same way that various constituencies in a community work together for a common objective.

We public partners in thirteen non-profit agencies, government entities and institutions whose work impact the area. The projects addressed the agendas of the agencies as well as the curriculum. The resulting projects were of three types: 1) direct hands-on experience in the community; 2) research about neighborhood resources, networks and history; and, 3) involvement in community activism. Students chose which of the three project most closely matched their own learning objectives, their career paths and their own sense of where they might best make a contribution. All students involved in

projects opted to do so and were given the choice of an alternative assignment. During fall semester 1998, 290 students volunteered in various service projects in the Gateway District of Salt Lake City and volunteered a total of more than 4,000 total hours.

The projects were of three levels of sophistication or involvement in research agendas.

LEVEL I: INTRODUCTION TO ARCHITECTURE

Into the Schools

Students visited classrooms in four different area schools serving the population of children living in various parts of the area including the homeless shelter school, and Artspace non-profit day care center called "Our House." There they led discussions with school children about the spaces they live in, go to school in, and walk through, in short their neighborhoods. Students helped children understand how their neighborhoods have evolved over time, develop a sense of style and materiality, and helped children learn to appreciate their built environment and discuss ideas for preserving, respecting caring about the spaces they inhabit.

Pre-arch students volunteered in the homeless shelter playroom, a plain cinder block square, and came up with creative ideas for redesigning the space, making it a more fun environment for children. Pre-arch students also worked for the Mayor's office, visiting all of the parks in the city and assessing how well they satisfied ADA guidelines.

Multi-Cultural Senior Citizen Center

Students volunteered for a senior citizen who had lived in the area since their youth and was currently residing at the area senior center. They became friends with their senior, talking with them about their history in the neighborhood, and ended the semester with a formal oral interview, adding the senior citizen's own life experience to the collective narrative of the city. This recognized the value of anecdote, the power of words as an amalgam of the personal and the public, of analysis and hard earned experience; stories that have some enduring public grain which when shared reflect a common public good.

Resource Identification and Community Activism

This service learning group identified agencies/institutions/individuals involved in the west side and created a resource handbook representing their collective efforts, asking questions such as: Who are key area agencies and services? What are their particular agendas? How do they work? How are they funded? Are there more effective ways of accomplishing their objectives? What do they offer the neighborhood? Are there services or resources that are seriously lacking? What physical features create a sense of neighborhood and community? What factors prevent a sense of neighborhood from functioning effectively for community members in this physical area?

Two students, one a talented photographer the other a writer produced a book about the clientele for low-cost housing. It included teachers, factory workers, shop clerks, and so forth. But the combination of a narrative and photographs made a very compelling point about why low cost housing is an important component in the revitalization of this neighborhood.

LEVEL II: GRADUATE LEVEL UTAH ARCHITECTURE

Students in the Utah Architecture class attempted to recreate the cultural and ethnically diverse historical character of city blocks in the district using Sanborn maps, historic photographs, public directories and other primary source materials. The final product was a model of the block, a written historical narrative and photographic

essay which will be deposited at the new multicultural center. "Bridges" to be built in the area. It is the intention that each year, the projects will continue along the same theme but build on the previous year's research base.

LEVEL III: HONORS, ARCHITECTURE IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

The community mapping project these students did was in some ways the most exciting because there was no model—the students had to come up with innovative and creative ways of mapping relationships in the Gateway. Community mapping as we came to define it is a process which combines visual information conveyed through a map as well as ideas about relationships or networks of relations that form communities. Each student chose a topic to explore, a characteristic about this place—open spaces and the way individuals use them or how they relate to physical structures, how the homeless population uses this neighborhood as their home, resources essential to the neighborhoods and how residents and outsiders use them and move between them, natural features, historic properties among other topics. Visually conveyed, ideas about community relationships speak to the ways individuals move through, occupy, and relate to one another or fail to relate to one another in neighborhoods and the larger environment. In an important way, they map history, social networks, and the ways the physical community provides the backdrop for human lives.

SERENDIPITY: LEARNING FROM SERVICE LEARNING COMES IN SURPRISING PLACES

Managing service learning with such a large student population felt like managing a small corporation. The logistical issues were enormous and always demanded immediate attention. For instance, relationships with public partners had to be carefully nurtured, I truly wanted our agendas to be shared and that took a lot of discussion and brainstorming. I also wanted the Service Learning TAs to have a sense of ownership of the projects which meant they needed to catch my vision of the project, and see how it matched their own. This was critical because they were the ones who spent the greatest amount of time communicating with the students and helping to make the connections between the projects and curriculum in the large class. Obviously, handling placements, managing schedules, and communication were all key issues. The more stream lined processes we developed to satisfy each of these issues made it far easier during spring semester the next time around.

In addition, in each class the schedule of the Service Learning project was in some ways parallel to but independent of the class schedule. Selling the idea of service and involvement in the project

was critical up front, continuing reflection and awareness of the connection to curriculum was important to schedule periodically throughout the semester as well. The ability to quickly adjust to changes, or flexibility in the face of possible crises was critical. We developed new projects in a matter of days in some instances.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the difficulties of managing Service Learning in the architecture classroom, the rewards are enormous. Observing a neighborhood, the way it functions, throbs with energy or lies pathetically weak, helps students create ways of identifying connections with others in a spatial sense. We ask them to do this in an almost ridiculously short period of time, but it was my hope that they would remember the experience and that it would begin a process of change.

We share common ground, in a sense sacred ground, the center from which we move out into the world and bring the world back in. Ideas about caring and preserving for what we come to define as home, the larger home of cities and public places gives rise to the patterns and the internal order that makes it distinctly ours. Connections to place are created by repetitions, structures built upon structures, creating the habits of home that reach out into the larger tide of neighborhood.

Communities are held together by what Wendell Berry calls "preserving knowledge." As he sees it, a community is an "order of memories" in which the "essential wisdom accumulates in communities much as fertility builds in the soil." Places are held in sites by personal and common values, and by the maintenance of those values over time, as memory.

These students helped create a body of data which will help preserve the history of this place—the oral histories, the resource handbook, the low-cost housing book—will be given to the non-profits in this place, but more important they will help form a collective "memory" of the people who have lived in and continue to call the Gateway their home. Here serendipity again occurs as students have discovered that, in a true collective sense, this history is also their history and they have come to recognize that the lines that separate these two parts of the city are less significant than they seem.

The word serendipity speaks to the type of learning or enlightenment that comes from surprising or unexpected places but stuns us with its significance. Service learning, when wedded to a curriculum of education about the social significance of our involvement with the built environment in intellectual and tangible experiential ways can enrich the learning process, provide students with experiences that forge commitments to community service and a sense of the way they play active roles in the life of our cities and can play a role in shaping community as we move into the twentieth-first century.