

## INvasive: A Collaborative Community-Built Environment

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*Participation – that's what's going to save the human race.*

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Pete Seeger

INvasive began as a conversation at the closing reception of the 2017 National Conference on the Beginning Design Student. The authors - Samantha Krukowski (University of Cincinnati) and Zeke Leonard (Syracuse University) - discussed the possibility of collaborating on a project for the 2018 conference - something other than a paper and presentation. We began thinking about creating a build event that would involve the participation of the conference community and that would result in a structure that evolved over the course of the conference. We also wanted to conflate the verbal/textual with the physical/spatial – to see the act of building as a discussion of ideas, and the manipulation and organization of materials as an exchange of opinions. This paper is a document of the conception, installation and completion of a temporary, collaborative and improvised structure that was constructed in the 4th floor atrium of the College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning (DAAP) at the University of Cincinnati from February 27-March 3, 2018.

Working between southern Ohio and upstate New York, the yet-to-be-named project evolved over the phone and in e-mails, until a formalized description emerged. INvasive was to be “a low-impact, community project that engages and builds bridges between and among conference attendees, DAAP students, faculty and staff” such that “the act of creating a built environment together through time provides a social fabric that weaves communal experience together.” Working before and across the three days of the conference, “professional and social connections (would) be made even as material connections (were) performed.”

But what material would be used to make these connections, fabric and experience? We wanted to keep the installation sustainable, and perhaps even utilize an unwanted material thereby engaging in some public service. Research into local plants revealed *Lonicera Japonica* as one of the top ten invasive species in the state of Ohio (OhioDNR.gov, 2018). Known as golden-and-silver honeysuckle or Japanese honeysuckle, this plant spreads rapidly, growing over and killing native species, and creating a mat-like root system that prevents the establishment of native species. Originally brought to Ohio to control erosion and feed wildlife, this honeysuckle actually aids erosion because its roots are superficial

and while its flowers can be nutritious for wildlife, it destroys wildlife habitats through uncontrolled overgrowth. Groups of people routinely organize honeysuckle-cutting parties in the Cincinnati Parks, and most people who have honeysuckle on their properties want it gone. *Lonicera Japonica* was exactly what we were looking for.

Where we could harvest honeysuckle needed to be determined. Samantha accessed neighborhood listservs and social media to offer free removal of honeysuckle near the university. The response to these postings was overwhelming – we were eventually able to visit only a fraction of the properties offered as harvest sites. One response included the name and number of the Supervisor of West District Parks, who met Samantha in Burnet Woods one rainy afternoon to identify honeysuckle harvest sites there. “Wear gloves and don’t cut below six inches,” Larry Parker said. “You sometimes find needles and other stuff – if you find a needle just mark it and give me a call.” Larry was passionate about Cincinnati Parks and native species, very talkative and very anti-honeysuckle. In addition to the honeysuckle clogging the landscapes of a host of excited homeowners, we had a forest of honeysuckle to cull from, all of it carefully pointed out by a zealous park supervisor.

Zeke got to Cincinnati a few days before the conference, and before his arrival Samantha mapped out a route to start the harvest in earnest. We hadn’t yet asked for volunteer help, but a neighbor offered to join us with a bucket of glyphosate. We had to tell her to leave the glyphosate at home – Larry Parker forbade its use - she was nonetheless undeterred and brought her cutting tools when she showed up on Samantha’s porch the chilly morning after Zeke landed.

The first house we visited had honeysuckle lining the side walkway and back fence line. The owner had asked us to cut back all of the invasive plants in the yard. There were more than a dozen well-established bushes, with stems ranging from a half inch to six inches in diameter. Some stood twelve feet tall. Zeke double-checked with the owner, since removing all of the honeysuckle was going to radically change the quality of the landscape. He said, incredulously, “you really want it ALL gone?” “Oh yes please!” she answered, “absolutely all of it, we want our yard back!” And so it went, from one property to the next, with some homeowners joining in the hard work of cutting, sawing, carrying and loading branches into the truck. The morning we spent harvesting in Burnet Woods, we actually drew the applause of many walkers out just after sunrise.



*Fig 1. Photograph by Matthew Hogan*

Honeysuckle is physically varied. Branches can be long and sinewy, elastic and flexible. They can also be woody, heavy, thick and twisted. Samantha and Zeke began to discover differences in their process and approach to the material and the project almost as soon as the harvest began. At the first site Samantha excitedly held up a gnarled and massive stem but Zeke wasn't impressed. "How can you not want this one?" she said, unbelieving, as her breath clouded the cold air. "Too twisted, too short," Zeke replied, eyebrows raised, before turning back to trimming. "You're crazy, we're keeping it" she said, and walked it and another like it to the truck. Before tossing it in, she passed by Zeke's piles of long, straight stems, arranged by diameter. "OK, Captain Intuitive," Zeke laughed. "OK, Master Planner," Samantha joked back.

It was actually delightful to have radically different work methods and to experience creative abrasion. Zeke fetishized planning; his approach was firmly grounded in his background in set and furniture design. Samantha focused on the experience of the harvest and on what the material revealed and suggested; her background in architecture and performance supported a more spontaneous and revelatory approach. These individual tendencies showed themselves not only as the honeysuckle was identified and gathered up, but also as soon as construction began. Zeke's search for certain kinds of stems (long straight ones, thin ones for filler and weaving) revealed his plans and his predetermined vision for the structure and form of the final installation. Samantha didn't have an image in mind, she was interested in finding out how the honeysuckle would transform in and be transformative for the atrium site at the University of Cincinnati. Zeke was developing something to take to the site, Samantha

wanted to leave room to respond to the conditions that presented themselves once the material was imported.



Fig 2. Photograph by Matthew Hogan

The need for locality in design has been argued for some time. Viktor Papanek was an early and fierce advocate for social and ecological responsibility in design when he published *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (1971). Stuart Walker extends Papanek's arguments in his work on sustainability, and in *Sustainable by Design* (2006) he wrote:

*"A characteristic of improvisation is that we have to make do with what is available and use limited resources in creative new ways. A priori solutions are less feasible and a type of design is encouraged that is more sensitive to, and contingent on, context."*  
(Stuart Walker and Fran Ford, 2006)

Both Zeke and Samantha worked in ways that required an assessment of the materials gathered and an analysis based on locality and material characteristics. This assessment and analysis allowed them to utilize these characteristics as formal, structural, spatial and experiential drivers in the final construction.

**INvasive** was in part a reaction against a global market that allows materials to be shipped cheaply around the world and to be just as cheaply processed, undermining any understanding of or respect for things "local." This market has allowed not only for the outsourcing of material harvesting and production methods, but also to an outsourcing of *understanding of impact*. One aim of **INvasive** was

to re-center all of these components: materials, methods, making, and understanding of impact, and, in making them accessible to those in and around the conference, to foreground their necessity in design practices.

Rex Curry, former president of the Association for Community Design, reminds “in the community design model, the whole community is considered to be the developer, the contractor, and the end user.” (Curry, 2018). Although many projects try to be (or claim to be) community design projects, a project in which a community envisions the project, mobilizes materials to realize its design, and then inhabits it, can be frustratingly rare. **INvasive** ended up being an ideal community design project. The entire structure was made of stems and jute twine. Community designer/builders had only to bind a stem in place, either through wrapping or weaving, to add to and shift its form. As groups of conference attendees and students arrived to help with the build, the installation grew and shrank, became more dense or porous, taller or shorter, extensive or compressed. One condition that allowed for direct community involvement was an intentional directness of materials: in many cases, aggregation relied simply on friction and the pliability of the honeysuckle.



Fig 3. Photographs by Jameson Watts

**INvasive** was built in an atrium that is open and filled with light, but getting the material to the atrium was not straightforward. We had a box truck and a half-ton pickup truck, both full for multiple trips, and a construction crane was intermittently blocking access to the building we were headed for. A twisting driveway led to a basement loading dock, where trash cans were lined up to receive the honeysuckle. The cans were filled and then dragged into a freight elevator, sometimes with resistance when the longest stems exceeded the height of the elevator or got stuck in its cage. Up two stories, and the cans were hauled out of the elevator, often too slowly to escape the loud warning indicating the elevator doors were closing. And then they were pulled down a thin hallway, turned into a wider hallway, and finally delivered to the atrium. The whole process was a kind of dance, with the stems being unceremoniously dragged or precariously teetering on shoulders, and this dance described in motion some of what was to be realized in form. Sometimes the truck was too short (or the stems too long), sometimes the cans were too top heavy and fell over, sometimes the honeysuckle poked and tore and scratched and showed its aggression even after it was no longer rooted to the ground. There was

phenomenology and pragmatism – most of the conversation was “I’ll just carry this up the stairs”, or “do you have the good clippers with the orange handle”, or “this is too small, why did we bring it, it’s going to compost” or “can I borrow your knife again?”

Samantha and Zeke were on site continuously during the early parts of the build. They offered suggestions when attendees and students were timid at first about engaging the project, and helped an armature begin to take shape. The introduction of ladders made significant vertical extension possible, and some builders delighted in constructing height while others focused more on the ground plane. As the armature grew and became more definitive, more people got involved with place-making, the design of shapes and surfaces, and detailing. Circles appeared as motifs, then woven panels, and then stacked masses. The project really took off when there were no perceived ‘supervisors’; what existed before lunch breaks was nothing like what was found afterwards. Samantha and Zeke began to back off, unless they felt they needed to be involved. Many hands (some more and some less expert) working over a long time period meant that the structure evolved unevenly. Some areas were more sturdy and reliable than others, some collapsed or threatened to do so. Midway through the build Samantha pointed out that there were some places where stems were escaping the structure, and others where bindings were loose or failing. Night became a time for “tidying,” stabilizing bindings, adding tension to weaves, triangulating the structure to keep it from falling apart.



Fig 4. Photographs by Jameson Watts

Richard Sennett articulated an essential part of the learning process in the making of this installation. In his seminal book *The Craftsman*, he wrote that intuition can be a “way of telling yourself that something you know can be other than you assumed.” (Sennett, 2008). Collaboration is one way of exercising this intuition – Zeke and Samantha’s different processes, when combined rather than viewed as oppositional, helped them direct the build of a structure that became something that neither of them could have envisioned in advance or made individually. Likewise, making room for community builders to act without supervision or surveillance was empowering and allowed them to explore and invent in ways they might not have if they felt there was an ‘authority’ present. Everyone who worked on **INvasive** brought varying levels of expectation and ability to the project. Sennett’s definition of intuition was maximized through an enthusiastic celebration of differences that were allowed to shape the installation.

The resulting environment showed the intersections of obsessive planning, intuition, and material responsiveness. It also revealed the presence of many hands, many approaches, many minds. Samantha and Zeke laid out some volumes and boundaries at the beginning that could be engaged by participants who were satisfied following directions. As the community took ownership of the project, there were unexpected moves and spatial surprises. Samantha and Zeke watched their roles evolve from builder/maker to facilitator. Play was an important component of the project, and both authors unapologetically feel that fun has a significant part to play in our work. The combination of varied approaches, direct community involvement and material research is a triadic map for the design of an object, a space, a pedagogy. There is, points out Master Planner, a need for an initial blueprint. There is also, responds Captain Intuitive, a fundamental responsibility to absorb a situation and react to it. Both agree the user/designer or the community member/designer, in the end became the force that saw **INvasive** through to completion. The authors plan to collaborate on projects that extend these lessons going forward.



*Fig 5. Photographs by Sandy Litchfield*