

Community Engagement and Community-Based Projects in Beginning Design Education

Author Silvina Lopez Barrera

Mississippi State University

Community-engagement and service-learning pedagogy in architecture

In 1996 Boyer and Mitgang conducted an independent study of architectural education and practice and they highlighted the importance of civic engagement in the architecture field. They recommended four broad strategies to be pursued by architectural education: “establish a climate for engagement, clarify the public benefits of architecture, promote the creation of new knowledge, and stress the critical importance of ethical professional behavior” (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996, p. 133). Furthermore, they recommended architecture schools to develop community service programs connecting the schools and the profession to social contexts (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996, pp. 26-28) .

There are diverse definitions and approaches to service-learning and its implications have been widely debated in architecture and related fields. Service-learning as a form of experiential learning and pedagogy connects and strengthens the relationship between community service and academic study. The use of community-based projects and academic learning enables the integration of traditional academic learning with lessons of social responsibility and citizenship (Kim & Abernethy, 2006, pp. 139-153).

Service learning pedagogy that integrates teaching, learning, service, scholarship, and research is at the core of the design professions. This is reflected in the growing number of community design centers across the U.S.; and there is evidence of community-engaged scholarship and service-learning pedagogy efforts in programs and projects within the design fields (architecture, landscape architecture, and planning). However, there is a tendency to approach service-learning without fully addressing issues of social justice, race, and class (Angotti, et al., 2011, pp. 1-16) .

Approaches to service-learning can range from field experience where the service component is a consequence of the learning experience, to transformative service-learning processes for students and community using critical pedagogy. This critical pedagogy encourages students to develop a critical understanding of social justice emphasizing empowerment of communities and reciprocity (Schuman, 2006, pp. 1-15).

The field of architecture often presents itself as political neutral and separates itself from social and historical contexts, reinforcing an architecture practice based on the “star architect” model and the signature building. This approach has made difficult the permanence and presence of social-engaged design and community-engaged design in architecture studios where the emphasis is on community collaboration and process (Schuman, 2006, pp. 1-15).

As a consequence to the professionalization of the architecture discipline and its dependency on the interests of the construction industry and real-estate development, the traditional approach to architecture education in studios has overestimated the focus on skills, development, and technical knowledge. This approach gives limited value and time to architectural education as humanistic and liberal arts endeavor limiting its ethical substance (Coleman, 2010, p. 201).

In contrast to ‘traditional’ approaches, there is a growing number of non-traditional architectural practices that focus on community- based design, highlighting efforts to provide architectural services

to communities that need design but cannot afford architectural services (Bell, 2004). Scholars emphasize the importance of recognizing the political implications of architecture education and practice. Gutman (2004, pp. 14-20) highlights the importance for the profession to engage in political action where architects can address specific issues related to low-income housing design and production while encouraging the expansion of government programs. Community engagement in architectural education presents an opportunity to create a framework for political design where architecture is developed in collaboration with communities and disrupting the status-quo (Gamez & Rogers, 2008, p. 23).

The inclusion of community-based projects in architecture studios confronts the traditional approach of architecture education by teaching studios highlighting the role of the architect in society and emphasizing community-based design work as a critical enquiry.

Partnership and reciprocity

One of the main challenges of community-engaged learning is transforming specific collaborative projects into long-term partnerships that can coordinate the community partner's timeline with the academic calendar. Ideally in long-term sustainable partnerships, multiple classes can work with the same community partner over the years where different classes can participate in different projects (Jay, 2010).

In community engagement and service-learning pedagogy, communities and organizations are defined in a broad way, from micro-communities within a particular group or place, to neighborhoods and to institutions that could work at the national or at the global scale. There are different kinds of university-community partnerships, from hierarchical structures to more egalitarian partnership structures where the power is shared among the partners (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012).

Meaningful service-learning models are developed when the relationships between academia and community partners are based on reciprocity, where both students and community partners benefit from the partnership. According to Enos and Morton (2003), there are two distinct types of partnerships: the transactional and the transformative partnership. While transactional partnerships are usually task oriented or short-term projects limited to a certain outcome, transformative partnerships tend to be open-ended process that allow further collaborations (Enos & Morton, 2003) (Clayton , et al., 2010) (Thompson & Jesiek , 2017). In addition, the relationships between partners can be dynamic and transactional partnerships can evolve from project-based commitments to transformative long-term commitments (Enos & Morton, 2003).

In community-engaged architecture courses, reciprocity implies that students work with the community partners rather than for the community partners. Strong reciprocal partnerships can support social capital, facilitate access to resources, empower community partners, and provide real world experience to the students (Stewart & Alrutz, 2012).

Davis, et al. (2017) suggest that partnerships and outcomes improve when power and reciprocity are acknowledged and mapped among partners. This practice of community engagement develops an environment where all the participants are part of the decision-making process in an equal way.

Asset-based approach and multicultural perspective

Asset-based approach in community-based design presents a new opportunity for designers to engage with community members focusing on the capabilities and strengths of the community rather than the needs. During the design process, designers can help to strengthen existing community assets and capitalize on them to develop innovative design solutions by identifying the assets and their potential benefits to the community (Hendler-Voss & Hendler-Voss, 2008).

In general, community-engaged design projects are complimented when they connect students' learning to serve and work with underserved or marginalized populations. However, this approach can be criticized when the benefit for the community is unclear and when the collaborative processes do not acknowledge the racial, ethnical, and class differences between community partners and students (Lawson, et al., 2011) .

In other to respond to this criticism, Lawson et al. (2011) advocate for an integration of multicultural education with design instruction, providing opportunities for students to collaborate and share in the decision-making process, and to understand and reflect on the different power dynamics, inequality, privilege, and their own biases.

Understanding the context and diverse values of the partners represents an opportunity to connect the production of knowledge with community to advance social justice values. Community engagement projects can help embracing the diversity of the community partners and underrepresented groups. The engagement projects can capitalize on the knowledge of the community partners to establish a non-hierarchical relationship between students and the community members.

Community-based architecture projects in the context of liberal arts education

The different community-based projects presented in this paper address some of the opportunities and challenges of using service-learning pedagogy and community-engaged projects in architecture studios.

This section explores partnerships and reciprocity in three community-based projects in beginning design and architectural studios in Middlebury College. These three community-engaged projects were developed with community partners in Vermont, including Town Offices and the organization Migrant Justice in the period between 2014 - 2016.

Food Hub- Addison Co.

The Food Hub community-engaged project was the result of a relationship between the "Introduction to architectural design studio" and the Office of Business Development & Innovation in Middlebury in the Spring 2015. This collaborative design project explored the idea of developing a food/agricultural hub that could capitalize on existing local food systems efforts in Addison County in Vermont.

This community-engaged project involved the design of the architectural program and schematic design of the potential Food Hub. Based on participant observation and mapping assignments, students developed a design and building program that included a storage area for fresh agricultural produce, an indoor year-round market area, and a process area for the aggregation, cleaning, washing, sorting, sizing, and boxing of the received fresh produce (prior to been moved to the market area). In this project students worked in teams to generate the architectural program design, site analysis, and design vision. As part of studio fieldwork, students visited the potential site (see figure 1) and visited the local farmers market.



Figure 1: Field work. Source: Photo by author

The partnership in this community-engaged project was transactional oriented and it was limited to the specific outcome of the design process. Additionally, this was a short-term partnership and a project-based commitment facilitated by the Office of Community Engagement at Middlebury College.

Passenger Train Station- Middlebury

In 2015, Vermont's congressional delegation and the governor announced a \$10 million federal grant to improve rail service along the state's Western Corridor, which included plans for restoring the passenger service between Rutland and Burlington (VT). This presented an opportunity for the Town of Middlebury to propose a passenger train station.

In this community-engaged project, the "Architectural Thesis Studio" partnered with the Middlebury



Town Offices to explore the development of potential sites, the architectural program design, and the schematic design for the passenger train station. During the design process students met with community partners to explore a design vision for the passenger train station, to gather relevant information, and to obtain feedback about their design ideas (see figure 2). The fieldwork in this studio included visits to potential sites and a visit and tour to the railyard in Burlington (VT) (see figure 3).

Figure 2: Students meeting with community partners. Source: Photo by author

Although the partnership in this project was transactional in nature because it was focused on results from the collaborative design process, reciprocity was embraced by the mutual benefit of student and community partners. The Town Offices needed assistance in identifying at least three different sites for potential development and students provided the required assistance, developed design ideas, and gained real world experience.



Figure 3: Students visiting railyard in Burlington, VT. Source: Photo by author

Centro Cultural Movil (CCM)- Mobile Hub- Migrant Justice

During Spring 2016, the studio "Introduction to architectural design" partnered with the organization Migrant Justice from Burlington, VT. Migrant Justice is an organization that advocates for human rights of Latino farmworkers in Vermont. Latino migrants represent an important share of farmworkers in Vermont dairy farms and they are often un-documented. Latino farmworkers typically work 60-80 hours per week and they experience extreme isolation living and working in remote rural areas. The majority of these farmworkers lack basic freedoms like the ability to gather as a community, go to the hospital, or go to the market (Migrant Justice, n.d.).



Figure 4: Participatory design meetings. Source: Photo by author and Oliver Oglesby

This project included a participatory design process to identify assets and needs, and to develop a design vision and potential design solutions for a cultural mobile hub that could facilitate access to basic community resources to farmworkers who were geographically isolated (see figure 4). The mobile-hub project was part of a long-term transformative partnership where the commitment extended beyond the participatory design process and studio course outcome.

Reciprocity was embraced throughout the project; the design process empowered community members and provided valuable insight into their priorities and shared values, and motivated strategic design decisions. This community-based project with Migrant Justice allowed the incorporation of social justice in architecture studio curriculum, bringing local knowledge and activists into the classroom to facilitate discussions about human rights and architecture (see figure 5).



Figure 5: Activists and farmworkers in the classroom. Source: Photo by author and Oliver Oglesby

Assessment of students' learning process

In community-engagement student's learning process is shared through the nature of their questions and answers, their interactions with community members, and their ability to take and generate critical perspectives and views.

Asset-based approach was used in the architecture community-based projects presented in this paper. In this approach, students with community partners started the design processes by identifying resources and capitals of the community. This allowed students to understand the potential benefits of maximizing and capitalizing on existing community resources. Participant observation, research, and mapping assignments were fundamental components within the early design phases.

Interactions with community partners through community-engagement meetings were an integral component for students' learning assessment. Prior to these meetings, students were expected to prepare a plan for the meetings as well as to prepare questions for the community partners. During the community- engagement meetings students had multiple roles and assignments; students brainstormed with community partners, facilitated oral and visual communication, and presented design ideas.

Challenges of community-based projects: understanding power dynamics and diversity

Finally, this section discusses challenges of creating long-term partnerships and reciprocity recognizing the social and cultural diversity between community partners and architecture students, their social networks, and the complex relationships of power between them.

The fieldwork and community-engagement activities developed in the design processes of the three different projects, allowed students to engage with real world issues, engaging existing site conditions and different community members. In general, these community-engaged projects encouraged students to develop empathy and to understand the social, economic, political, and environmental complexities associated with each community-based project. However, the three projects had different degrees of engagement from consultation in the decision-making process (Food Hub and Train Station) to empowering the community (Mobile Hub).

In the Food Hub and the Passenger Train Station empowerment was limited because community-engagement was based on consultation in the decision-making process. In addition, power dynamics were not challenged during the design process because of the transactional characteristic of the partnerships focused on a specific design outcome and the limitation of working within the academic calendar.

On the other hand, the Mobile Hub project was part of a long-term collaboration with Migrant Justice that extended beyond the academic calendar. In this case, empowerment and collaboration in the decision-making process were emphasized by the nature of the participatory design process. Throughout the participatory design meetings students were asked to work in teams with the community partners. There was a total of three teams and each team was comprised by architecture students, members of the Latino farmworker community and activists from the organization Migrant Justice. This collaborative and participatory design project emphasized on the principle of knowledge exchange and reciprocal learning process between students and community partners.

Finally, students' reflections were intentionally incorporated throughout the Mobile Hub design process and after each participatory design meeting, there were in-class student group discussions and debriefs to understand the power dynamics and the challenges of the participatory design process, questioning students' own assumptions and reflecting on privilege and injustice to develop engagement with the local community.

References

1. Angotti, T., Doble, C. & Horrigan, P., 2011. *Service-Learning in Design and Planning: educating at the boundaries*. Oakland, CA: New Village Press.
2. Bell, B., 2004. *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
3. Boyer, E. L. & Mitgang, L. D., 1996. *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*, Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
4. Clayton, P. H. et al., 2010. Differentiating and assessing relationships in Service-Learning and Civic Engagement: Exploitative, Transactional, or Transformational. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16(2), p. 5–21.
5. Coleman, N., 2010. The Limits of Professional Architectural Education. *JADE*, 29(2), pp. 200-212.
6. Collins, K. & Raymond, I., 4-7 June 2006. Dare we jump off Arnstein's ladder? Social learning as a new policy paradigm. Edinburgh, s.n.
7. Davis, K. L., Kliever, B. W. & Nicolaidis, A., 2017. Power and Reciprocity in Partnerships: Deliberative Civic Engagement and Transformative Learning in Community-Engaged Scholarship. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 21(1), pp. 30-54.

8. Diaz Moore, K. & Wang, D., 2006. Reflection and Reciprocity in Interdisciplinary Design Service-Learning. In: *From the Studio to the Streets: Service-Learning In Planning and Architecture*. Sterling(VA): Stylus Publishing LLC.
9. Enos, S. & Morton, K., 2003. Building partnerships for service-learning. In: B. Jacoby, ed. *Developing a theory and practice of campus-community partnerships*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 20-41.
10. Gamez, J. L. & Rogers, S., 2008. An Architecture of Change. In: B. Bell & K. Wakeford, eds. *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*. New York(NY): Metropolis Books, pp. 18-25.
11. Gutman, R., 2004. Two Questions for Architecture. In: *Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, pp. 14-20.
12. Hendler-Voss, A. & Hendler-Voss, S., 2008. Designing with an Asset-Based Approach. In: B. Bell & K. Wakeford, eds. *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*. New York: Metropolis Books, pp. 124-131.
13. Jay, G., 2010. The engaged humanities: Principles and practices for public scholarship and teaching. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 3(1), pp. 51-65.
14. Kim, J. & Abernethy, J., 2006. Service-Learning as a Holistic Inquiry and Community Outreach Studios. In: *From the Studio to the Streets: Service-Learning In Planning and Architecture*. Sterling(VA): Stylus Publishing LLC..
15. Lawson, L., Spanierman, L. B., Poteat, V. P. & Beer, A. M., 2011. Educating for Multicultural Learning: Revelations from East St. Louis Design Studio. In: T. Angotti, C. Doble & P. Horrigan, eds. *Service-Learning in Design and Planning: educating at the boundaries*. Oakland, CA: New Village Press, pp. 70-85.
16. Migrant Justice, n.d. Migrant Justice. [Online] Available at: <http://migrantjustice.net/about> [Accessed 29 March 2016].
17. Schuman, A. W., 2006. The Pedagogy of Engagement. In: *From the Studio to the Streets: Service-Learning In Planning and Architecture*. Sterling(VA): Stylus Publishing, LLC.
18. Stewart, T. & Alrutz, M., 2012. Meaningful relationships: Cruxes of university-community partnerships for sustainable and happy engagement. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 5(1), pp. 44-56.
19. Thompson, J. D. & Jesiek, B. K., 2017. Transactional, Cooperative, and Communal: Relating the Structure of Engineering Engagement Programs with the Nature of Partnerships. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Spring 2017, pp. 83-99.
20. Weerts, D. J. & Sandmann, L. R., 2010. Community Engagement and Boundary-Spanning Roles at Research Universities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, November-December, 81(6), pp. 632-657.