Empathizing with Clients: Teaching Students How to Design for 'The Other'

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"By acting to further the interests of the other, one serves one's own interests as well." [1]

This quote by Celeste Friend discusses how David Gauthier expanded on Thomas Hobbes views of Social Contract Theory by arguing for cooperation of self-interested parties based on rationality. Gauthier was using the Prisoner's Dilemma argument, but the theory can also be used to format pedagogy to teach architecture students the importance of working equally together with non-profit clients, or in this context "the other." However, rationality alone cannot be used to teach students the importance of egalitarianism and learning from those different from them. Students must also be taught to respect and empower the clients with whom they are working. This paper discusses examples of how the author engaged students using service-learning standards such as reflection and reciprocity, as well as alternative methods such as limited role-playing through protagonist stories. The results are students who are more engaged with and empathetic to the clients, but also more aware of the social justice issues that impact the field of architecture and the "public" that it affects.

INTRODUCTION

"...social space explicitly acknowledges the contribution of others, and with this dismisses the notion of expert authorship that the professions still cling to." [2]

The Profession

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) outlines several things in the 2017 Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. But some of those things are confusing and contradictory. The "Statement in Compliance with Antitrust Law" vaguely outlines three items that "...are not, in themselves, unethical, unprofessional, or contrary to any policy of The American Institute of Architects or any of its components:
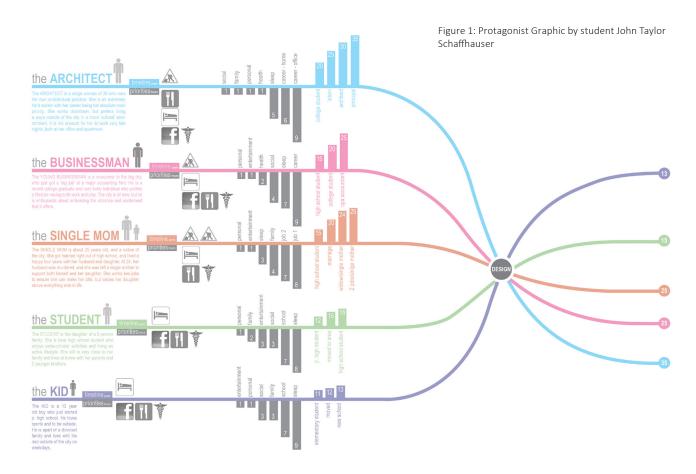
1. submitting, at any time, competitive bids or price quotations, including in circumstances where price is the sole or principal consideration in the selection of an architect;

2. providing discounts; or

3. providing free services.

Individual architects or architecture firms, acting alone and not on behalf of the Institute or any of its components, are free to

decide for themselves whether or not to engage in any of these practices. Antitrust law permits the Institute, its components, or Members to advocate legislative or other government policies or actions relating to these practices. Finally, architects should continue to consult with state laws or regulations governing the practice of architecture."

The third item implying that "providing free services" is not unethical or unprofessional, yet is specifically called out in the Code of Ethics is confusing. Especially since later in the document under "Canon II – Obligations to the Public" in E.S.2.2 Public Interest Services pro bono services are defined as "... those rendered without expecting compensation, including those rendered for indigent persons, after disasters, or in other emergencies." When the professional association for architects is not more clear in how architects can ethically help those who cannot afford design services it is hard for our students to understand that as well. Additionally, since the definition of pro bono services does not extend to individuals or organizations that could not otherwise afford design services, how does this help the public? The majority of the public does not have access to design services because they cannot afford them, so how do we address this issue in education and practice?

Wasserman, Sullivan, and Palermo delved into this issue with their book Ethics and the Practice of Architecture, published in 2000. The authors give an overview of ethics, looking at topics such as Social Contract Theory as they cover the four basic ethical theories of teleology and utility, deontology, virtue: excellence, and contract theory. The authors relate architecture to these four theories and also provide case studies for readers to use to think about the application of ethics on professional practice. [3] Nevertheless, they do not consider the ethics in relation to Social Contract Theory for the responsibilities that architects have to the hidden public, those that do not have access to design services. The social contract as it currently relates to architecture is limited to the use of public money to public projects, but should also extended to the interaction and service of the public in design services, such as non-profit organizations and underserved populations.

Architects have a contract with clients, but no contract with the public that their work affects; those with whom there is no legal contract. However, what is the ethical relationship and impact? [4] I argue that the Social Contract for architects goes beyond the impact of their built work on non-clients

(the "public") and extends to working with those who may not typically be a client due to their economic and social status. Since the Social Contract ideally establishes equality and equal access to "certain goods" then design services should be considered something everyone has equal access to as part of the Social Contract. [5] Our students are very interested in engaging with non-profits and helping to address social justice issues with their work through pro bono services to these underserved populations. The profession has an opportunity to engage this passion from the incoming generation and make both the profession, and the academe, more relevant to our current society. [6]

The Academe

Many universities are implementing community engagement whether through avenues such as a Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation, or through the land-grant mission of extension and engagement with the state community. [7] Our university has embraced both and supports the research, teaching, and service of faculty who study service-learning and community engagement. Projects that this author has worked on include architecture program mainstays such as working with Habitat for Humanity, but also opportunities to work with the Boys & Girls Club, a Community Foods Research Group, and the development of an NSF Grant on ethics in STEM in higher education. Despite

these important public outreach and engagement projects we see that public universities are struggling with limited budgets and state funding. Due to this they struggle to prove to the public the relevance and need of higher education. Therefore, taking advantage of opportunities within universities to engage the public through Extension programs and the "Third Mission" of service has become a necessity. [8] Not only does this help to educate the public as to the importance and relevance of universities, it also provides the opportunity for "…broader and deeper engagement and civic responsibility by colleges and universities." [9]

Additional benefits of community engagement for faculty and universities include expanded research opportunities that advance knowledge on socially meaningful research, and the opportunity to develop theories through the implementation of practice-based projects. [10] This is especially important to architecture programs that are educating the next generation of licensed architects who will be facing the future of socially engaged practice. [11] Faculty also improve their teaching by utilizing the reflective aspects of service-learning to assess and revise their pedagogy based on working with community partners. [12] But faculty must make a concerted effort to fully understand the needs and perspective of the community partner to create a successful partnership so that all parties can learn and benefit. It is harder for the benefits for the community partner to be realized as they have challenges
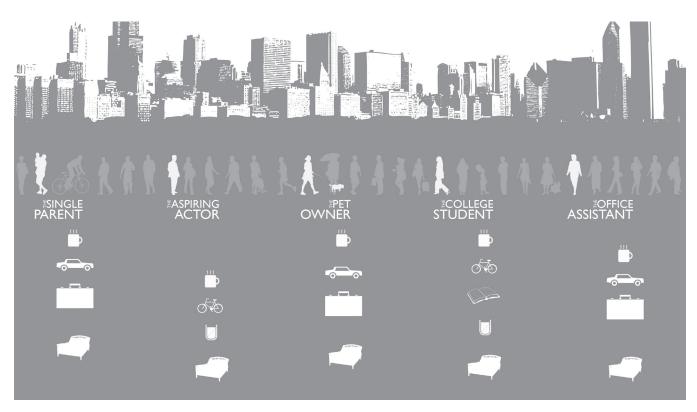
Figure 2: Protagonist Graphic by student Haley Whiteman

such as limited budgets, limited staff, and limited facilities that a typical architectural client would not have. Student and faculty needs tend to take priority over the community partner needs, which is not a good lesson to teach students when service-learning is about reciprocity and egalitarianism.[13] Further challenges that community partners face when partnering with universities include:

- "sustainability of partnership

- balancing power and control

- controlling political influences

- unrealistic expectations and views from the part of the faculty and students

- students being inadequately prepared to work in a culturally diverse context" [14]

Faculty are the conduits for community partnerships and have a responsibility to create and facilitate a pedagogy that treats community partners equally, and with respect. These efforts will teach students how to empathize with their clients and overcome some of their preconceived notions of what community engagement means.

The Students

Community engagement projects are very educational for students and give them a chance to explore ideas that may not be available in typical theoretical classroom settings.

Working with a real client, and one that is very different from what the students grew up with, gives the prospect for a wide variety of student learning outcomes. [15] The scope of learning outcomes the author has integrated into community engagement projects range from developing a budget for a non-profit, fund raising for a non-profit, working with other disciplines and departments such as horticulture, health promotion, and education, to working with low-income children and families with economic and educational struggles. This exposure to "the other", or a client from a neighborhood, town, or socio-economic level different from the students, has led to the students understanding the value of the inputs and information the community partner can provide. Klein, et al. proposes that this type of interdisciplinary experience for students helps to create the egalitarianism needed for "knowledge exchange or knowledge co-generation." [16]

Projects like this, with interdisciplinary teams, tend to be more complex and need more maintenance. But, as Strier notes, this complexity affords the occasion to create understanding, acceptance, and a bonding opportunity between the students and community partner. This is important when working with large groups in a partnership to help overcome conflicts, and to create an egalitarian framework for the project. [17] This is a continuous struggle, as this author can attest, because most community partners tend to look towards the faculty to lead the project. Conversely, the community partner must become the eventual leader for the project to continue into the future and remain successful.

Student experiences must continuously be addressed in service-learning projects that engage a community partner. [18] This helps the faculty develop courses that remain focused on creating relationships between the students and community partner while linking the materials learned in lecture courses to the practice of architecture with a real-world client. [19] Notwithstanding the best efforts of faculty, students may still see the community partner as "people in need" and not see the people they are working with as equal partners that have just as much to provide as do the students and faculty. Because of this faculty must be sure to encourage the students to leave these theoretical views of "disadvantaged communities and power relations" aside and actually get to know the people with which they are working. Focused discussions outside of architectural theory can address this issue by engaging students in conversations about the impact of working equally with a community partner. [20] The author has found that specific reflection questions that the students must answer tends to also help the students assess their preconceived notions about the community partner and other project team members. Faculty must be continuously aware of how they advance and frame a service-learning class and community engaged project. Students must always understand that these projects are partnerships and not the students "giving" something to someone in need. [21]

ENCOURAGING EMPATHY

> "…the agent is one who effects change through the empowerment of others, allowing them to engage in their spatial environments in ways previously unknown or unavailable to them, opening up new freedoms and potentials as a result of reconfigured social space." [22]

Protagonist Stories

> "The people must be able to identify with one another, and at least know who each other are." [23]

Architecture students are imaginative, creative, and inquisitive, so the author utilizes a tool introduced to her by a colleague in her first year of teaching, creating a protagonist, to help the students empathize with their clients. The author has evolved this first introduction into a project where the students use exercises from A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future from the "Story" chapter to create stories for various users of the building. The author asks the students to use the different exercises such as "Write a Mini-Saga", "Whip Out the Tape Recorder", "Riff on Opening Lines", "Play Photo Finish", and "Ask Yourself: Who Are These People?" to explore stories for the different people who will be impacted by their design. [24] This can range from the building owner (typically the community partner we work with) to the building user (clients for Habitat for Humanity), and even those who may never enter the building but pass by it on a daily basis. Students then create a graphic to show what they have learned about their protagonists to help them design the project for someone other than himself or herself. (Figures 1,2, and 3) Protagonist stories have helped students empathize with hypothetical clients on projects like Habitat for Humanity houses, multi-family/mixed-use housing, and low-income housing studio projects. These were used to start the students thinking about who their client is and how to engage with the client once they meet face-to-face.

Meeting and Presenting to the Client

Many students are nervous when meeting their clients for the first time, whether it is because they are not sure what to expect, or whether they have preconceived notions of who their client really is and what they are like. Meetings with students and community partners/clients should begin with a no-pressure meeting just so that everyone can get to know one another before the design begins. The author has conducted these types of "get to know you" meetings on various projects. Typically meals are involved so that everyone sits down together around a table as equals and gets to know one another personally. Children are invited to these meetings as they may also be the end user for projects such as a home where they will live, or a playground where they will play every day. This helps to create egalitarianism by dispelling hierarchy when everyone sits down together to eat a meal. The creation of common ground for the first meeting of students and client helps to start the project off on a more open and friendly footing.

The next meeting steps up the professionalism as the students begin visiting the project site, whether the office of the community partner or a separate project site. Students must now put on their architect hat and ask questions, measure spaces, and get to know the architectural aspects of the project. Faculty must be sure to educate the client that they also are an important part of these meetings and have much information to contribute through answering the student questions, but also by asking the students questions as well. Meetings are an important way to continue the reciprocity of the service-learning project with a community partner, and faculty are integral to keeping this balance between student and client.

Oftentimes the client is a board for the community partner organization and students must learn how to work with not just one community partner member, but many. This creates a more complex project than one that is interdisciplinary. Nevertheless, it does give the students an opportunity to learn how to balance various viewpoints from one "client" on a project. Students in past service-learning classes taught by the author have had to take into account the "client" of the end user, and the "client" of the building owner and their sometimes-contradictory input. While this was a valuable learning experience it did not ultimately result in a finished project, which taught both the students and the faculty a lesson in dealing with complicated client frameworks.

Presenting the results of design ideas is another step for the students in that they now have to defend their ideas instead of just asking questions. This is always a challenge for the students when working with a real client, even with the research, role-playing exercises of the protagonist stories, and meetings that they have experienced. The previously mentioned board for a community partner, along with the end user, was a uniquely difficulty presentation for the students because the board members had very strong reactions to the student design, while the end user was too intimidated to comment on the design. The students were frustrated as they felt that the design was ultimately for the end user and not the board. Nonetheless, this helped the students start to understand the dynamics of power and social justice when the project was canceled and the needs of the end user were not taken into account. While this may not have helped the egalitarian efforts expressed earlier in the paper, it instilled in the students the importance of equality in community partner projects. More successful presentations to community partners included the director of a non-profit for children and the excitement and engagement of the children in the work with the students. (Figure 4) The director became a champion for the project expressing:

> "I know our kids aren't as exposed to nutrition and gardening as they should be. So this project will definitely get the community involved, will get the parents involved, and will give us the opportunity to change our focus."

Reflections

> "Reflection describes the process of deriving meaning and knowledge from experience and occurs before, during and after a service-learning project. Effective reflection engages both service-learning leaders and participants in a thoughtful and thought-provoking process that consciously connects learning with experience." [25]

This quote from the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse shows that reflection is needed to help students "derive meaning" from their service-learning experience. Faculty must create questions to spur appropriate reflection related to the project so that students can focus their reflections to the learning outcomes for each specific partnership with a community partner. This, along with the reciprocity inherent in true community partnerships, creates a successful learning opportunity for students. An example of some of the reflection questions used by the authors include:

1. Based on the research conducted in class analyzing the basic requirements and needs of Habitat for Humanity homeowners, discuss your feelings on service-learning in architecture and how they may have changed since your last journal entry. Discuss why your feelings have

or have not changed. Also discuss what you have learned through the research in class.

2. Now that the class has presented to research and conceptual designs to the homeowners now have your feelings changed now that you can compare the generic information provided on habitat for Humanity homeowner needs and the feedback you received as part of your presentation? How does this inform your ideas of how to design for the clients of Habitat for Humanity in this project? How does it affect your design choices?

3. As designers and builders we must constantly look out for the best interests of our client, even if they are getting in the way of those interests. How does service-learning in architecture, and working with a non-profit client such as Habitat for Humanity, work with these ethical issues?

Similar questions were asked for the project working with a non-profit for children and below are a selection of reflection comments showing what students learned from the project.

Selected Reflections

1. Discuss what your existing experiences and feelings are for service-learning, whether related to architecture or not. If you do have experience with service-learning related to architecture please discuss those experiences instead of experiences not related to architecture.

   • "I personally believe that service-learning is crucial for the architecture profession. We absolutely must learn from the communities we serve. If we do not, architecture becomes irrelevant. It becomes about create beautiful artifacts lacking contextual significance. Architecture is about spaces and individual experiences in those places."

   • "I tend to take a phenomenological approach to my work, trying to understand the experience of the individual and how they feel both physically and emotional. By learning through service, I am able to understand the importance of human experience and interaction."

   • "There is no room for the elitist views of architecture. This I feel allows us to relate architecture back to people."

2. Based on the research conducted in class analyzing the basic requirements and needs of the client, discuss your feelings on service-learning in architecture and how they may have changed since your last journal entry. Discuss why your feelings have or have not changed. Also discuss what you have learned through the research in class.

   • Many critics of architects, and architecture programs, that work with non-profit programs that provide architecture and construction services (such as Auburn University's Rural Studio program) accuse the designers
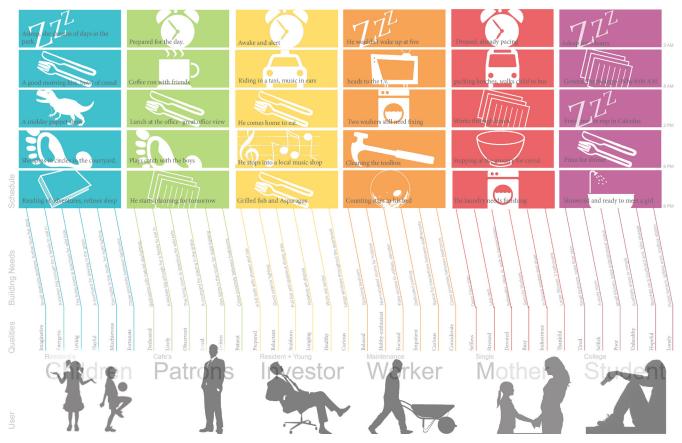
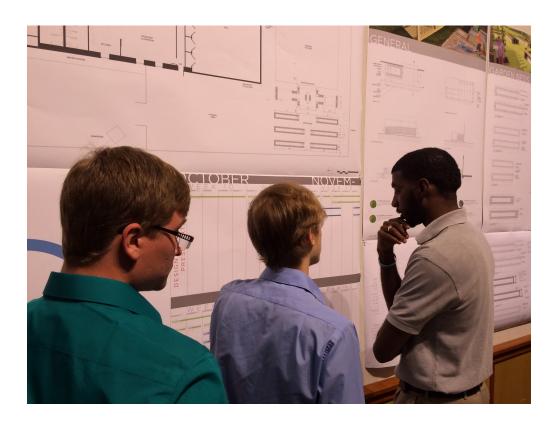Figure 3: Protagonist Graphic by student Brooke Dorman

Figure 4: Students presenting their designs to the director of the non-profit for children (photo by author)

of experimenting on poor people because they do not have the income to move to another home if they do not like the design that is provided free-of-charge. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with this idea and why you agree or disagree with this idea. Do you see this class as "experimenting" on the client?"I feel that the use of service learning has enlightened me to the civic duties of the architect that we speak so much of but very rarely get to see while in the learning experience. It allows us to take on more than the role of design and instead allow design to have impact on those outside of our field. This allows them to see design not as something you pay more for or is only available of those of 1%."

- "In the review we had this past Monday it was helpful to get input from (redacted). So far we were just speculating things we thought the (redacted) would need, and (redacted) thought they would be utilized well. I think that moving forward with the current proposal is a good idea, yet something (redacted) stuck with me. What will the children think, and how will they use it? The service-learning project allows us to effectively get feed back from our client(s) (redacted), as well as the children, be it through asking them directly or through observations, or a Post Occupancy Evaluation. Personally I think this is a great way of going about the project. Even if we were to be able to finish all the proposed work we wouldn't be able to see the full effect for quite some time. Going back to see how they use the spaces would in the end benefit me as an architect by providing me with valuable information as to how I can improve my designs in the future."

- Many critics of architects, and architecture programs, that work with non-profit programs that provide architecture and construction services (such as Auburn University's Rural Studio program) accuse the designers of experimenting on poor people because they do not have the income to move to another home if they do not like the design that is provided free-of-charge. Discuss whether you agree or disagree with this idea and why you agree or disagree with this idea. Do you see this class as "experimenting" on the client?

- "I do think there is some sort of experimenting that happens, but is that a bad thing? When it comes to low income (sic) projects, you have to be creative. Although I do think the line to be drawn involves safety. Auburn Rural Studio does some fairly interesting things for a low budget I assume, then what is the problem. I also think that the "clients" are/should be expecting something a little different from a regular home. It is FREE. You can not (sic) argue with that. This is all within reason. My point is which is which is (sic) better: a cookie cutter home that is made from donated or purchased materials or an interesting home made from mostly repurposed materials. It also gives budding architects a chance to have real experience."

CONCLUSION

"New ways of working and behaving are demanded if we are to avoid being impotent passengers on the rollercoaster of boom and bust cycles." [26]

Based on the feedback from the students they were generally successful in empathizing with the client and starting to learn more about people who are different from them, or "the other." While some students still tend to think that the client should be grateful for what they are "given" by the students as part of the project, overall the projects have been successful in opening the minds of the students as to what the community partner can provide to create a successful project. This relates to the importance of teaching students that reciprocity is inherent in service-learning and community engagement, so that they understand architecture cannot be successful without an equal partnership with the community partner. Students learn "agency" as part of these service-learning projects that engage the community on equal footing. They may be part of the current structure of society, but they are challenging it and learning about social justice by working with those who typically do not have access to design services. [27] This reinforces Socrates argument for the Social Contract that we should respect and abide by the rules of society and the social contract (structure), but we should not blindly obey those rules and should constantly question and examine them to continue to move society forward (agency). [28] Students also learned the importance of "mutual knowledge", a term coined by Giddeon to show that knowledge is not relegated to those who are professionals or highly educated, but instead relates to the everyday exchanges and intuition of the community. [29] This is an important relationship to the ideas of egalitarianism discussed earlier that can show the public the relevance of higher education and partnering together to solve society's concerns. Additionally, this research should encourage the architectural profession that it needs to more fully embrace community engagement, service-learning, and social justice as a way to recruit future architects and to overcome the hubris seen as inherent in the field. Students are asking for this change and it is slowly happening in the academe, but needs be better supported by universities, and to continue on to the profession.

"If you ask a potential architecture student why they want to study architecture, the most common response is along the lines: 'I want to design buildings and make the world a better place.' Implicit in this answer is the assumption that there is a causal link between designing a building and making the world a better place, and it is this link that architects cling to through the thick and thin of practice." [30]

Architectural faculty and licensed architects seem to have forgotten the reason we and our students all have chosen this profession. We must look to, and lead, our students back to the heart of architecture: the people we design for.

ENDNOTES

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