

In Service of the Public Interest: The Public Design Corps

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2020, the confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests spurred architecture schools across the nation into sites of sociopolitical action. The students’ capacity to self-organize, articulate the urgent need for changes and demand institutional responses was bold and unapologetic. At stake was a perceived numbness in the curricular structures, classrooms, and syllabi that made universities complicit with the status quo and the ethos guiding academic excellence, inappropriate. At the University of Michigan, student organizing took on a bold stance calling the college to take a position and go beyond words to implement meaningful changes. Design Justice Actions (DJA) brought together students from across degrees in the college to give shape to a manifesto that would turn their many discontents into actionable components. Students used persuasion and imagination, found allies, and built coalitions in and out of the school. Convening not one, but many conversations, students instigated curriculum rethinking, access and representation, the profession, institutional co-governance, and more.

The Public Design Corps (the Corps) initiative emerged in alignment to DJA action #8,¹ so it was first and foremost, the product of students and faculty ingenuity reclaiming the capacity of architectural education to question what and how we teach and learn, and work with community partners to co-design, test and prototype ideas from advocacy to activism. But what is the Corps and how does it work? At its most basic, the Corps offers students the opportunity to exercise architectural skills in collaborative projects guided by principles of spatial justice. NCARB-recognized,² the Corps connects students in architecture, urban design and planning with mission-driven organizations to tackle pressing economic, environmental, social, and spatial challenges. Neither a community design center nor a community service curricular component, the Corps situates the commitment to design experimentation as currency. Community partners, students and faculty mentors collaborate to turn need assessments into problem spaces where



Figure 1. Building on the work led by students at the University Michigan, the Corps embodies a collaboration between faculty and students to prototype additional opportunities for engaged learning.

opportunities for exploration and discovery guide the work. This agenda demands a predisposition to open-endedness and a candid commitment to challenge automated problem-solving. As a hybrid space between academia and the profession, PDC offers a locus to practice mutual learning and co-production.

THE CORPS

The Corps operates under the assumption that architecture serves as an alibi to usher in new forms of social organization. It moves beyond preoccupations with form in the built environment, expanding to include programs, systems, and human relations. This nimble and tactical attitude toward architectural practice made the Corps uniquely poised to challenge the limitations that the pandemic-imposed online context would imply

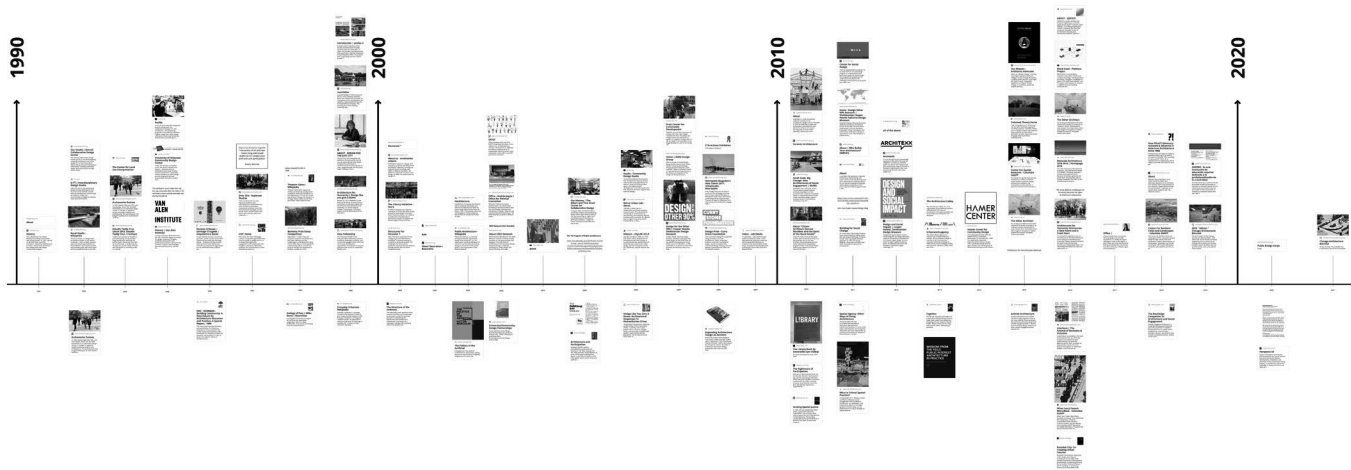


Figure 2. Models shaping public interest design / social design practices since the 1990s. Research included as a component of the Corps initiative.

otherwise. Typically conducted in person, low-fidelity public interest design work most often proceeds from a supposition that communities lack access to the technology necessary to collaborate and participate digitally. When the pandemic hit, the Public Design Corps was compelled to check these suppositions, moving forward with a socially engaged design agenda while simultaneously addressing uneven access to digital infrastructure and digital space. Through partnerships with a range of mission-driven, non-profit organizations,³ the exigent issues of digital inclusion were laid bare, prompting the development of light, tech savvy and smartphone accessible projects. This confluence of circumstances yielded unexpected outputs, sparking new thinking around design's capacity to sponsor collaboration, engage participation, and shape public discourse in digital space. Importantly, the initiative ushered in new methods of cooperation at a social and political inflection point when algorithmic determinacy in mass communication threatened the very fabric of our democracy.

The Corps is conceived as a pedagogical experiment that empowers students to take a leading role in shaping their educational experience. The triad student teams+community partner+faculty mentor aims to provide a multilayered experience where traditional classroom hierarchies are shifted. Building additional opportunities to diversify the educational experience, graduate and undergraduate students may opt for professional licensure credit (AXP), course credit, service work, and CPT/OPT for international students. While the Corps operates as an intense summer initiative, the work seeded over July and August can (and has) continued as for-credit independent studies in subsequent semesters as students cultivate their relationship with the community partners. The fluidity in the options aims to shape more pluralistic approaches to architectural education that recognize the singularity of each student.

Together with the project focus, an important initiative component is the public programming it sponsors. Since its inception, the Corps has capitalized on the opportunity to invite others to generate new conversations that help situate ways of “working with” and to engender critical reflection on the process. Lectures by faculty sharing work and models of engaged pedagogy are open to the entire college and offer yet another learning opportunity.

In our search for a practice model, we rely on the generosity of the community partners and the in-house expertise to set common ground. While the E. Ginsberg Center⁴ helps students navigate expectations with best practices in community engagement, our community partners bring a unique understanding of the opportunities afforded by engaging young and creative professionals searching to have a positive impact in the world.

By presenting this pedagogic initiative as a work in progress, we aim to reinforce its experimental nature. Two years in the making, with little infrastructure or funding to support it, the Corps remains a space for experimentation where students, community partners, and faculty mentors are committed to act and critically reflect on the ways design agency may instigate the redistribution of resources and power in the shaping of the built environment. What has resulted to date, tracks a gradient of unanticipated outcomes, where neither the partner/client nor the student/designer are rehearsing and retracing the well-trodden, established process of normative practice. Rather, the Corps contends a deliberate challenge to existing patterns and processes in order to reshape the priorities we espouse in the teaching and learning of architecture, and to redraw the cohorts of who participates in and benefits from the discipline and profession of architecture. Thus, we bring forth the Corps as an experimental pedagogical project to tackle the *what* and *how* of architectural education for a pluralistic society.



Figure 5. Matrix of selected projects developed as part of the initiative.

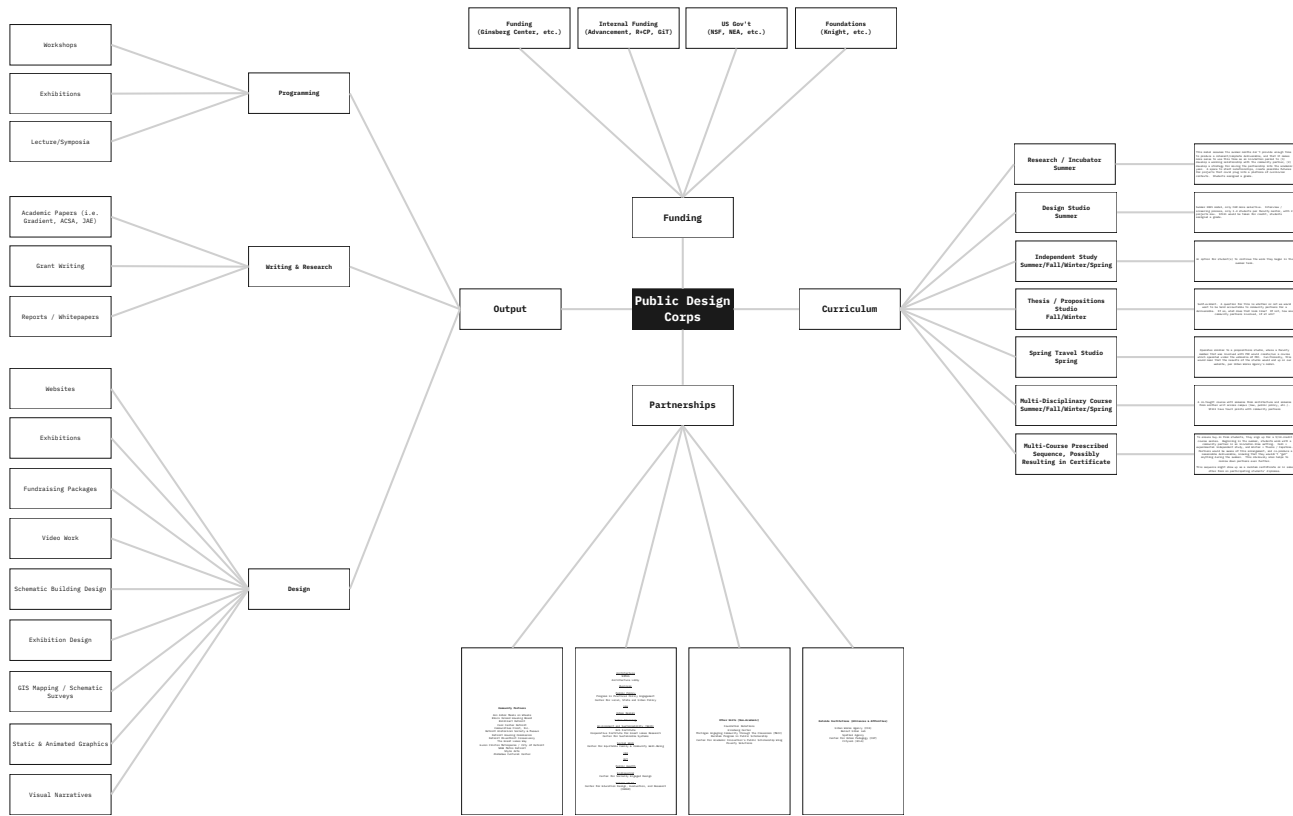


Figure 6: The Corps: Organizational Map of the Initiative

ENDNOTES

1. DJA 8: Create more opportunities in our curriculum for community voice-in-process, specifically BIPOC community members, so that students gain agency in the built environment. Engage local Community Design Centers to provide a realistic and sound context for student community engagement and grassroots activism. Offer transdisciplinary Architecture, Urban Design studios, and URP capstones that forefront activism, planning policy, and design that promote human dignity and support a built environment free from embedded oppression.
2. NCARB-recognized Community Based Design Center in the state of Michigan.
3. The Summer 2020 organizational partners include the Ann Arbor Meals on Wheels, Brilliant Detroit, Carr Center Detroit, Sage Metro Detroit, Shylo Arts, and Zimbabwe Cultural Center. The Summer 2021 organizational partners include Block Island Housing Board, Carr Center Detroit, Communities First, Inc., Detroit Historical Society & Museum, Detroit Housing Commission, Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, The Great Lakes Way, and Huron Clinton Metroparks / City of Detroit.
4. The Ginsberg Center at the University of Michigan cultivates and stewards equitable partnerships between communities and academia in order to advance social change for the public good. Based upon this mission, our vision is for inclusive democracy; thriving, diverse communities; and equity and social justice.