A Holistic Inquiry Into the Built Environment: Case Study of a Community Outreach Studio

JOONGSUB KIM
Lawrence Technological University

Working with community residents and community agencies in low-income neighborhoods in architectural design studios challenges instructors, students, and other stakeholders to overcome limited resources (e.g., low resident participation or funding, lack of facilities for community meetings or presentations), communication difficulties (e.g., between student architects and laypersons), and cultural differences (e.g., white suburban students vs. black urban residents). Moreover, teaching white students the value of a community-based approach, while building a long-term, professional, working relationship with poor black residents, (e.g., for data collection on local neighborhoods, information dissemination throughout a community) imposes an extra pedagogical challenge.

The goal of this paper is to describe a holistic inquiry into the built environment undertaken at the community outreach studios called "The Detroit Studio" (a pseudonym) of an architecture school in Michigan. The paper describes a study of projects undertaken at the studio to illustrate the studio's mode of inquiry. It presents preliminary outcomes of interviews and a questionnaire survey of students, residents, and other studio participants regarding their experiences during their studio participation. A holistic inquiry into the built environment utilizes a combination of community-based, interdisciplinary, and collaborative strategies, as well as social scientific methods, in a design studio.

Working with instructors from various disciplines, students collaborate with residents of poor Detroit neighborhoods at The Detroit Studio. During a typical semester, The Detroit Studio offers a junior-level studio course. This studio consists of three distinctive but related components: architecture, urban design, and building systems. Typically, a different instructor teaches each component according to a different time schedule because of College of Architecture curriculum and contact hours requirements. An architecture instructor takes the lead, however, coordinating the three components regarding major studio activities (e.g., joint review sessions, community presentations).

Moreover, the studio's location is an important factor given the (interdisciplinary and collaborative) structure of the studio and its typical project content (e.g., design of a church in a poor urban area). The Detroit Studio is located a short drive from many poor urban neighborhoods in Detroit. It is a community-based satellite studio of the College of Architecture. The Detroit Studio acts as a community outreach facility and as a community learning lab to actively engage the community and diverse stakeholders in any given project.

The Studio receives various project proposals from local community organizations or residents who are interested in collaborating. All of these projects are located in underserved areas of Detroit. Project proposals are reviewed by the coordinating faculty of the Studio and its advisory committee members. A proposal is reviewed according to several criteria (e.g., there should be evidence of civic and community support for the proposed project).

CURRENT TREND: TWO PREVAILING APPROACHES

This section discusses several existing models of holistic inquiry into the built environment that utilize collaborative and interdisciplinary strategies. Two such examples – a service-learning model and a human equity model – are considered here because they are most relevant to what the Detroit Studio seeks to achieve.

The service-learning model has been widely debated in architecture, urban planning, and other related fields. Definitions vary considerably among its supporters. Supporters would agree, however, that, at its core, service-learning is a form of experiential learning that employs service as its primary focus (Crews, 1995). Service-learning is a pedagogy that links community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic theory of service-learning lies in Dewey's approach: The interaction of knowledge and skills with

experience is key to learning (Ehrlich, 1996). Students learn best not by reading the Great Books in a closed classroom but by opening the doors of experience. Learning starts with problems and continues with the application of increasingly complex ideas and increasingly sophisticated skills to increasingly complicated problems (Ehrlich, 1996).

Kraft and Krug (1994) state that a service-learning program offers educational experiences through which students learn and develop by actively participating in carefully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs. Coordinating such service in collaboration with the community and schools enhances what is taught by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community. This in turn helps to foster a sense of caring for others with the greatest needs.

The notion that education serves as a fundamental agent of socialization has been the concern of many scholars in architecture. This reflects various worries among scholars who think about traditional design studio pedagogy, content, and culture, as described in several recent publications and reports on architectural education. They have debated alternative approaches to teaching a design studio. One such approach pertains to human equity. Arguably, a study by Boyer and Mitgang (1996) best advances a human equity model. This approach supports studios that address human equity for both students and those who inhabit or experience the built environment. Proponents of a human equity model urge faculty to engage in teaching architecture as a socially embedded discipline and practice and to foster an atmosphere of collaboration and respect in their classrooms.

Boyer and Mitgang contend that the curricular and design sequences at architecture schools should foster a climate of caring for human needs by including more frequent contact with clients and communities and by placing greater emphasis on environment and behavior. Building to meet human needs means helping architecture students become effective teachers and listeners who are able to translate the concerns of clients and communities into caring design.

The recent report known as the "Redesign of Studio Culture" by American Institutes of Architecture Students (2002) recognizes the design studio as both a challenge and a venue with the potential for increasing awareness of human equity issues. The report calls for change throughout its detailed critique of current practices in design studio education. The report emphasizes the need for increased diversity in architectural education. It contends that, in addition to issues of race and gender, architectural education too often ignores other underrepresented groups. Its authors argue that acceptance of all individuals regardless of gender, race, creed, religion, sexuality, socio-economic background, or physical disability must be sought. Consequently, through exposure to groups of people

with whom we may be less familiar, the architectural discipline will be strengthened with a better understanding of how to design for everyone.

As such, the ideas underlying both a service-learning model and a human equity model, which are closely related to each other, are comparable to the five concepts that support the community-based studios at The Detroit Studio. These concepts — namely, conversation, social learning, negotiation, deliberative design, and the environment-behavior perspective — are described in detail in the next section. The aforementioned studies argue for generating a more human-centered curriculum and for improving access for people who need it the most in schools of architecture. They also emphasize the need for a holistic view of design in which there is no separation between human health, environmental health, and social justice. They highlight the essential or vital connections that must be made to create inclusive, healthy, and sustainable neighborhoods or communities. The increasing separation of populations or societies by race and income and the struggle to end environmental racism and gender discrimination are all interrelated community-building challenges and tasks. Such models or approaches also emphasize teaching the goals and techniques of inclusive or universal design in design school programs.

Community design centers or design-build studios housed typically in colleges or schools of architecture have been developed in part on the basis of a human equity model or a service-learning model. They have grown in number over the years. Yet empirical study on their effectiveness is rare, as Hou's and Rios's study (2003) suggests. The present paper is an attempt to pave the way for assessing our community-based studios at The Detroit Studio in a social-scientific manner.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS AND STRATEGIES FOR A HOLISTIC INQUIRY AT THE DETROIT STUDIO

The aforementioned works have influenced how a holistic approach is developed at The Detroit Studio. The studio addresses the concerns and ideals described in these reports (e.g., Boyer's and Mitgang's), but while these ideas serve as general guidelines for the studio, specific lessons from five previous studies carried out by other scholars provide theoretical underpinning and a necessary practical tool for the design and research studio. Specific examples undertaken at The Detroit Studio that promote the following five concepts are discussed in detail in this and the next section.

Conversation

Schneekloth and Shibley in their placemaking model (1995) argue that placemaking embodies a set of tasks performed to support practice: creating an open space for dialogue about place and placemaking through good relationships with place

constituencies or stakeholders; seeking the dialectical work of confirmation and interrogation; facilitating the framing of action. Such placemaking can be realized in part through a conversation-based, "constructive" design process to promote more active community participation. Frequent informal but personalized desk crits, for example, at the Detroit Studio emulate intense conversational placemaking. In addition, faculty, students and studio clients are constantly engaged in casual, spontaneous, but necessary conversation (both planned and unplanned) on the activities of the day or week, as issues arise daily or weekly at the project site or at the studio.

Social learning

Dogan and Zimring's concept: *Interaction of Programming and Design* (2002) demonstrates the social-learning benefit of interaction with clients. The authors argue that the relationship between programming and design is interactive. Programmatic issues and design issues should be clarified together. Accordingly, during this interactive process both client and architect assume significant responsibilities and clients have the potential to play crucial roles in design. The interactive model suggests that the architect-experts should facilitate the opportunity for clients to play a co-partner role in identifying challenges and opportunities that the project presents and in developing or evaluating design alternatives. Such an interactive process offers the opportunity for each party to learn from each other's perspectives in diverse social settings. Frequent informative meetings and focus-group sessions with the studio clients and other stakeholders at the Detroit Studio as well as onsite interaction among the faculty, the students, the studio clients, and local residents provide ample opportunity for rich social learning.

Negotiation

The approach taken in a consensus design model (e.g., Day's, 2002) posits negotiation as an essential component of successful consensus building. Day contends that when professionals design places for people, many things obvious to the residents are overlooked; when places are designed by laypersons, the design can suffer from a lowest-common-denominator effect; when places are designed by both together, conflict often ensues. However, as the author argues, co-design is not doomed to conflict or banality if it is managed correctly. Consensus design teaches us how to reach agreement within a specific time frame with diverse groups of people. Negotiation is one such approach to facilitate consensus. Consensus design can involve people in meaningfully shaping where they live and work. Constructive negotiation can help stakeholders to see opportunities and challenges that each other's environments present, to recognize the constraints within which they have to work, to live together but differently, and to maintain stable and healthy relationship among different parties. Day argues that consensus can influence social stability, personal health, and building

longevity, all of which in turn affect environmental costs. In various reviews at the Detroit Studio sessions, both formal and informal, all participants are challenged to engage in negotiation concerning design decisions.

Deliberative design

In the book entitled *The Deliberative Practitioner* by Forester (1999), Forester contends that citizen participation in such complex issues as the quality of the environment, housing, and urban design often provokes anger among stakeholders and power plays by many — as well as appeals to rational argument. Forester shows how skillful deliberative practices can facilitate practical and timely participatory planning processes. He draws on law, philosophy, literature, political science, and planning to explore the challenges and possibilities of deliberative practice. Forester's ideas are relevant to architecture since the design context is often fraught with differences, conflicts, and inequalities. A design process can shape opinion and create value, transforming not just material conditions but human relationships. Forester's theory demonstrates the significance of public deliberations that give space to plural voices and strengthen democratic practices. He argues that adversarial situations are not predetermining. In the context of design solutions they can be negotiated towards collaborative action. Deliberative design should utilize a process of learning together to craft strategies towards greater community good. Specific examples that promote deliberative design, such as group decision-making, workshops, or community design charrettes undertaken at the Detroit Studio are discussed in the next section ("Specific Processes and Approaches").

Environment and behavior perspective

Boyer and Mitgang emphasize environment-behavior in design education and practice (1996). Canter refers to one such example of a social-scientific perspective as the 'Place' model. He proposes that place consists of physical attributes, people's behavior, and people's meaning (1977). This suggests that an inquiry into a place requires an understanding of the characteristics of the place (e.g., the condition of buildings) and those of the people who use it (e.g., demographic information). Given the poverty of the neighborhoods in Detroit we currently work with at The Detroit Studio, for example, this would require us to address how the unique needs of the subgroups within any given place can be better understood. Such investigation would often require a social-scientific approach (e.g., a survey) at the Detroit Studio. Within an audience that is primarily African-American in Detroit, the subgroups often include children and older people as well as people with disabilities of all ages. Also, the studio projects consider demographic, social, and economic factors in deciding, for example, appropriate building materials through behavioral, observational, and precedent studies.

Drawing upon these previous findings, I created a design/research studio utilizing interdisciplinary, community-based, and collaborative approaches to architecture and urban issues. Furthermore, I explore architectural design conceived as a set of "deliberative" design practices. To this end, the studio focuses on the use of architectural design as a tool to promote social learning, negotiation, conversation, and community-building. All of these constructs — conversation (to have a dialogue on common goals), social learning (to share various community perspectives), negotiation (to achieve group consensus), and deliberative design practices (to foster participatory processes for creating community value) — promote community-building during the planning and design of the built environment.

Any given project area becomes a living laboratory for exploring fresh perspectives in community design, for fostering healthy cultural reform, and for revitalizing the urban environment. The studio serves as a civic design forum for debating contemporary design paradigms, developing arguments for new urban theories, and testing theories. To accomplish this, this studio, in addition to including the typical focus-group sessions, design charrettes, neighborhood presentations, crits, and workshops, engages in social-scientific research (interviews, a survey, observational studies, Post Occupancy Evaluation, and archival research). Research activities include testing hypotheses, evaluating existing facilities, conducting feasibility studies, and formulating design principles. Social-scientific research is also utilized to evaluate student work and studio outcomes (e.g., testing a design hypothesis through a community survey).

Documentation of studio outcomes involves not just the final product but also the process (what steps we take, how we arrive at consensus, how we resolve conflicts or differences of opinion in design, what disagreements we have, and how we use disagreement to promote consensus). Readers would be able to use such "process"-based information as a practical, precedent-setting educational resource. The studio activities are shared with the entire University via the Detroit Studio's Web site or the University sites. The aforementioned focus-group sessions and a community charrette provide another special occasion on which other students and instructors are welcome to participate.

SPECIFIC PROCESSES AND APPROACHES

Understanding the needs of the subgroups within a target area

The following is an overview of "a multi-faceted" system that I incorporated into the studio to address this issue effectively. For example, regarding the current project at the studio (project title: "Community Theatre as a Catalyst for Urban and Cultural Regeneration in Poor Areas of Detroit"), since late August the students have been conducting site, local, and regional analyses

of our project area. This assignment pertains to the first component of this comprehensive approach. Part of this assignment includes demographic analyses of the site and its neighborhood. One of the main goals of the analyses is improved understanding of key demographic characteristics (e.g., identification of dominant age groups and various subgroups). The class and the Detroit Repertory Theatre (our studio client) already met together and have had additional meetings to compare notes regarding the findings of research by students and the theater. Key local residents, in addition to serving as interview subjects, also participated in this process by forwarding or sharing their findings, data, or information sources with the studio throughout the semester. In this way the groups can crosscheck their findings, benefit from one another's perspectives, and capture a reasonably accurate demographic picture of the project area.

The second component of the aforementioned multi-faceted approach is using the initial outcomes of the demographic analyses as a base from which to reach out to various local community organizations (e.g., block-group associations, small business owners' associations, non-profit organizations, schools, churches, etc.). With the assistance of these groups, we attempt to identify and understand the unique needs of the subgroups within the target area. Regarding the Southwest Detroit Neighborhood Urban Design project in the Spring 2003 term, the class had a first meeting at the studio with some of these organizations in early February. Additionally, the participants in this first meeting discussed future meeting schedules and agendas regarding their understanding of the needs and concerns of the subgroups and the community at large. In the aforementioned community theatre project, the studio worked with a major local community organization whose role was to be the primary contact group to facilitate citizen involvement and to identify the needs of subgroups. The two aforementioned approaches offer rich social-learning opportunities through which studio participants can enrich their views on the characteristics of the target community.

The third component of the multi-level approach is conducting in-depth interviews with representative samples of each of the subgroups regarding their needs. The interview questions for the Community Theatre and Urban and Cultural Regeneration project and for the Southwest Detroit Neighborhood Urban Design project at the Detroit Studio were developed by this author, the students, the clients, and other organizations based on the outcomes of the second component above. The questions are developed so that the participants' responses can be properly analyzed and documented. The interviews were conducted by this author and students between the beginning of the semester and the time of the midterm project review. The overall outcomes of the interviews are shared with all participants throughout the semester.

The fourth component of the multi-level approach is utilizing social-scientific methods to explore the needs of the subgroups. Regarding the Quinn AME Church and Neighborhood Revitalization project, the Community Theatre and Urban and Cultural Regeneration project, and the Southwest Detroit Neighborhood Urban Design project at the Detroit Studio, an effort was already underway by this author to develop a questionnaire survey in the beginning of the semester. This process is more comprehensive and structured than the aforementioned in-depth interviews, which are more focused, smaller in scale, and face-to-face based. The main goal of the survey is to reach the larger population in the target area, especially groups who are underrepresented or reluctant to participate in the in-depth interview sessions mentioned above. Moreover, the conversational and qualitative nature of interviews supports the quantitative data of the survey. The preliminary questionnaire was developed on the basis of additional fieldwork and the interviews with the client group and other stakeholders. It consists of questions ascertaining the needs, concerns, issues, or expectations of the subgroups. The students, the client, and the community groups reviewed the draft survey. The questions were developed so that the participants' responses could be properly analyzed and documented. We had multiple pretests in the beginning of the semester before conducting the final survey prior to the midterm. The studio conducted follow-up interviews with some of the survey participants who were willing to be interviewed. The overall outcomes of the final survey are shared with all participants throughout the semester.

Experience with studio clients and other stakeholders and reading requirements

In the current project at the Detroit Studio, this author/instructor met with the clients alone only prior to the start of the semester. These meetings involved reviewing and finalizing the studio project (contents and scope), the semester schedule, pertinent school curriculum issues, publication issues, and other administrative/logistical matters. Once the semester begins, the students have or begin to have direct contact with the studio clients and other stakeholders in all site tours guided by the clients, through interviews, the survey, meetings, presentations, focus-group sessions, design charrettes, desk crits, and the public reception of the final project. Most of these activities are in the course syllabus. Some clients' meetings and interviews are initiated/coordinated by the students themselves, as they deem necessary. Regarding the Southwest Detroit Neighborhood Urban Design project, a series of workshop mini-sessions was held at the studio with area city planners, developers of public housing, economic and business development agencies, transportation providers and traffic planners, and other representatives of municipal services. The sessions were used as opportunities for community leaders to gather and exchange information about agency services and public approval. This aided in developing a greater public awareness and exposure of the groups' plans for community redevelopment

activities. As such, students enjoy ample social-learning opportunities to interact with all participating community groups.

Readings: key reading materials have been referenced throughout the semester in both individual and small-group assignments. Some reading assignments are given upon deliberation of this author's lectures on key issues. Students write papers and essays on certain key readings. Regarding other reading assignments, students are required to engage one another, both formally and informally, in group or class discussions via an Internet-based Blackboard Group Chat Room or at the studio. This promotes conversation and social learning among students and between students and instructors. For the current community theatre project at the Detroit Studio, readings come from three assigned textbooks, various scholarly articles, and Internet pieces concerning architecture, theatre, art, building systems, urban design, and community development. Also included are the works of Boyer and Mitgang and the five previous projects carried out by other scholars mentioned earlier (i.e., *Placemaking*, etc.).

Approach to review of students' work

The following describes the philosophy and process used for the implementation of the "holistic" assessment of the students' projects at the studios. A holistic assessment approach incorporates various measures that are inclusive, balanced, and multi-dimensional. Since the studio acts both as a community outreach agency and a community learning lab to actively engage the community and diverse stakeholders in the semester project, both provide ample opportunity for various participants to assess the students' work according to an approach that is interdisciplinary, both process and product-based, both incremental and comprehensive, both formal and informal, both theoretical and practical, and both architectural and social-scientific.

In taking this approach, the studio embraces not only conventional (or traditional) but also non-conventional studio review processes, although the latter are more crucial to promoting the goals of the proposed studio (thus the "holistic" assessment approach taken here). For example, in the case of the Southwest Detroit Neighborhood Urban Design Project, rather than completely rejecting a typical, traditional review process where students present their work to design expert juries/critics for their comments in front of all those present, the studio invited these critics to the public arena where their views, points of focus (e.g., an emphasis on aesthetics, or on form-making) and review approaches are contested and contrasted against the views of other stakeholders such as the studio clients, local community organizations, local officials, and the lay public. This public forum exposes disagreements, conflicts, and miscommunications, and all assessing parties have to learn how to reconcile differences among participants of diverse backgrounds and between theory and practice. In this way

participants learn how to arrive at consensus in a timely manner on what is considered a successful or desirable response to the issues that the target community and the client group face. The key does not necessarily lie, however, in achieving one ultimate design solution or result for all concerned parties, but rather in promoting each participant's ability to manage differences, democratic decision-making, and collective agreement in an expeditious manner through various review and deliberative processes. Additionally, to ensure the success of this consensus-based approach, all participants are reminded of the decisions or outcomes of the previous review session. This helps them determine the appropriate direction to take in subsequent review sessions. These approaches promote ample opportunities for rich social learning, deliberative practice, and negotiation.

More specifically, both midterm and final term reviews are based on the participation of design expert/critics, the clients, local community organizations, and city officials. Also incorporated into the schedule throughout the semester are numerous less formal or progress reviews, such as weekly assignment progress reviews, a pre-final review, and individual desk crits — where students would have more informal, casual, or conversational but nevertheless focused and personalized attention and input from not only design expert critics but also laypeople (i.e., studio clients, community agencies, residents) as well as municipal officials. Arguably, this type of informal review in a non-threatening atmosphere also respects those students who are introverted but equally talented and who do not always perform well in a traditional review process. Moreover, such casual/conversational, individual-based reviews can benefit non-traditional student groups in a seemingly diverse student mix in the current studio at the Detroit Studio (e.g., currently enrolled students include whites, blacks, Asians, females, males, single parents, Vietnam vets, etc.).

Community-based design charrettes and focus-group sessions provide varied but invaluable venues for reviewers to test the students' design hypotheses and to review their preliminary design alternatives through hands-on collective exercise and thematic group discussion among the class, the clients, community organizations, local residents, and other professional experts. Moreover, the survey of the studio participants suggests that these events help promote community-building efforts.

Students are assessed in terms of both their individual design work and group work. Moreover, attendance, participation, contribution, and professional conduct comprise 15% of the total course grade. This is to assure the students that a community-based studio requires individual initiative/dedication to promote collective efforts and responsibility for achieving the common good of the studio. This is again to emphasize social responsibility and to encourage a community-building effort in the studio.

On the whole, grading in each major review or other selected reviews is based on the combined assessment scores of students' work as judged by all participating reviewers — design experts, the studio client, local community organizations, residents, and this author. The questionnaire is used for all reviewers to document their comments or grades for a major review. The overall outcomes of the assessment questionnaire are shared with all participants throughout the semester. Also considered in the determination of a final course grade is each student's progress throughout the semester. Overall student progress is aggregated and incorporated into the publication of the final studio projects. This is one way to ensure the documentation of the process in which studio progress has been made.

In the Southwest Detroit Neighborhood Urban Design project and the Quinn AME Church Design and Neighborhood Revitalization project, the survey questionnaire and interviews were used to assess the overall outcomes of the studio at the Detroit Studio after the semester was completed. This was used in turn to assess the studio from the viewpoint of the studio clients, guest critics, and other stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Studio participants — including students, studio clients, community residents, guest critics, and other stakeholders — have participated in a survey and interviews since Fall 2002. Based on 45 completed survey questionnaires, which included both closed- and open-ended questions, more than 95% of respondents reported that the studio experience was positive in various respects. Among the positive benefits: gaining real life experience, learning from diverse perspectives, experiencing a sense of community, promoting community-building, learning from various disciplines, building working relationships with stakeholders, and networking, to name just a few. These findings were corroborated by 20 qualitative interview findings. Respondents frequently commented to the effect that "this studio taught me how to work with people who are different from me in terms of age, race, educational background, etc." "I learned that reality out there is messy ... things take so much time and effort ... being inclusive and collaborative is so important..."

There were, however, a few comments on negative aspects of the experience that mentioned disagreements, working on group projects where diverse stakeholders have strong voices on every issue, and not being able to make decisions in an expeditious manner because so many people participated in the project. In addition, there are a number of complex practical challenges that this type of studio often faces. For example, it is always difficult to coordinate participation of studio clients due to their busy schedule. Promoting residents' participation is another major challenge since many of them have large families to feed and long days at work. Facilitating a large-scale

community design charrette involving various stakeholders is always a daunting task. Moreover, trying to fit all these activities into the design studio curriculum is an ultimate logistical and administrative challenge. That many architecture students (at least initially) want to concentrate exclusively on design and consequently are eager to jump right into it as quickly as they can aggravates this problem. These challenges could be handled better if the studio would focus on small-scale but multiple events or approaches, rather than on large-scale activity. Also, utilizing a steering committee consisting of key community organizations could promote more active and effective resident participation. In addition, integrating design-related activities into all "non-design" events could engage architecture students more actively in the community-based processes.

Nevertheless, on the whole, a majority of respondents agrees that the approach taken at the Detroit Studio has given them an invaluable opportunity to experience placemaking in a holistic way: The outcomes of the interviews and the survey of participants in this interdisciplinary and collaborative studio demonstrate the considerable benefits of learning from people who represent diverse professional and disciplinary fields. The studio activities promote a better understanding of the cultural, political, and economic fabric that shapes urban and community design. This in turn helps students understand how design becomes meaningful for and interlaces with a community or neighborhood, through interacting with people from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and exploring how theory and practice are woven into a holistic view of and inquiry into the large-scale built environment.

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