

Envisioning the Future in the South End Neighborhood

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INTRODUCTION

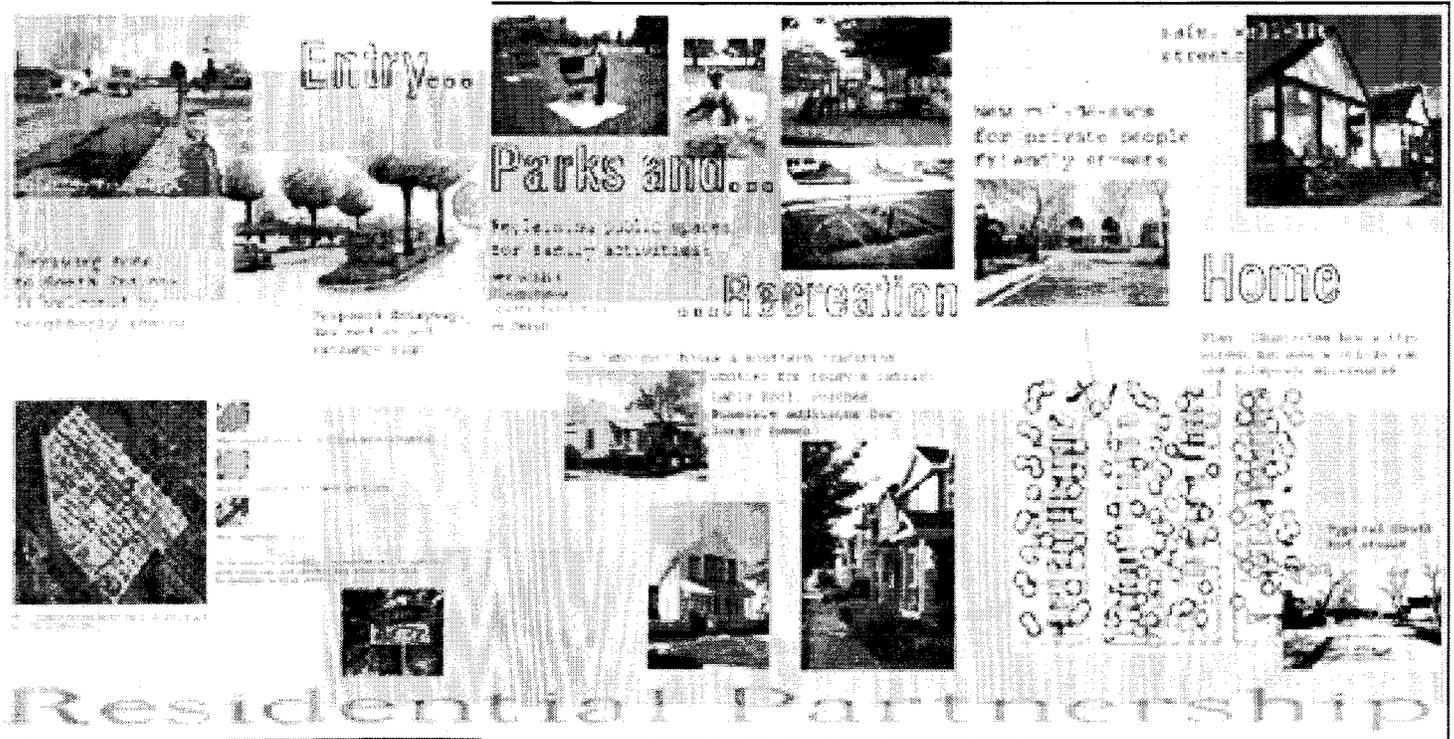
“Envisioning the Future in the South End Neighborhood” represents a studio-based urban design and planning process to support the ongoing community development efforts of the South End New Development Organization (SENDO). This city has dramatic needs for technical assistance and no existing city-level agency to provide needed design, planning, or community development support for non-profits. The interdisciplinary nature of the course has evolved during ESLARP’s thirteen-year history due to increasing awareness among architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning faculty, that the complex and nested relationships within East St. Louis’ neighborhoods require very close interdisciplinary collaboration. Designers and planners working in isolation cannot resolve the multi-scaled environmental and social problems confronting the neighborhoods of East St. Louis. At the same time designers and planner cannot propose appropriate solutions without responding to the environment as residents understand it as a result of their day-to-day life-experiences. This project would never have been possible without the University of Illinois’ East St. Louis Action Research Project support for both the focus on interdisciplinary collaboration and the participatory community design and neighborhood planning.

In 2002, SENDO partnered with the university’s outreach office to work toward envisioning the neighborhood’s future. The process began in spring semester of 2002, when students conducted extensive data collection that included physical factors, census data, and resident interviews, as well as ongoing outreach efforts to extend participation to more neighborhood residents. Students, faculty, and university staff drafted an interim report that included the inventory data and described possible areas for future research and community discussion.

Presenting this information back to the community provided an opportunity to correct data, articulate complex community concerns, and propose program areas and design solutions to be addressed in a neighborhood plan.



With data in hand, students in the spring 2003 studio engaged in a participatory process to express a neighborhood vision and produce a planning and urban design framework to guide future development and civic action. Previously developed GIS maps inventoried land use, vacancy, vegetation, and other factors and provided the basis for a new neighborhood base map that included qualitative features, such as building footprints, sidewalk conditions, and open space character. Student teams developed four alternative “futures” to illustrate the possibilities and to engage all the involved parties—students, faculty, residents, and officials—in a discussion of the plan’s ultimate intent. The alternatives were based on the four unique residential experiences identified in Sidney Brower’s national study of good neighborhoods.¹ When residents were presented with their community transformed into a residential suburb, a center city neighborhood, a retreat, and a small town neighborhood, they were able to articulate their own, more particular social and physical expectations. They described a



neighborhood that was shaped by its history as a close-knit African American community, a place to raise a family, and a residential area that was supported by its close proximity to East St. Louis and St. Louis. A vision statement emerged to guide the neighborhood process: “The South End is a place where families and households find a safe community and neighborhood pride. The neighborhood plan will flourish through physical improvements and community services supported by involved citizens.” With resident direction, the students developed the neighborhood plan’s content, including land use, circulation, housing, parks, and open space, and economic development. This was presented back to SENDO, city officials, and their university community for critical feedback.

PROJECT’S PLACE IN THE CURRICULUM

This design studio project was completed by an interdisciplinary service-learning course known as the Neighborhood Planning and Design Studio. This submission represents the work of students from the School of Architecture and the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Urban and Regional Planning who participated in the course during the spring 2002 (January 14-May 10, 2002) and the spring of 2003 (January 20-May 16, 2003). In both of these semesters, students were taught by faculty from the three disciplines who stressed interdisciplinary teaching, interdisciplinary learning, interdisciplinary methods, and interdisciplinary and participatory design processes. The Neighborhood Planning and Design Studio course had different official course titles and various levels of students in each of the three disciplines. In the School of

Architecture, “Envisioning the Future of the South End Neighborhood” was one of six possible studio options senior had for the final required course in the undergraduate design studio sequence. In the Department of Landscape Architecture, “Envisioning the Future of the South End Neighborhood” was one of three possible studio options that juniors and second-year graduate students in the professional program had for a required studio in the program’s design sequence. In the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, the course fulfilled the workshop or capstone requirement for undergraduates and graduate students respectively and was also an elective course for those specializing in community development.

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

The overall goals of this course are two-fold: to facilitate a participatory planning and urban design process in the South End neighborhood and, through this process, to teach students about community-based planning and design. The specific educational goals and objectives were:

1. To produce a final neighborhood plan that is accepted by the neighborhood, who will then seek the city’s approval of it as the official plan. The plan will include overall objectives, incremental projects, an implementation strategy, and phasing.
2. To introduce students to the process of community-based planning and design.

3. To prepare students with skills and understanding of issues relevant to community participation in professional practice.
4. To develop informed concern about contemporary social issues and tolerance and respect for different points of view.
5. To promote critical reflection on the role of community activists and social designers/planners in building, empowering, and sustaining communities.
6. To stimulate interest in the field of community development and related career opportunities.

A Vision of the Future



TEACHING STRATEGIES

In order to meet the specific educational goals and objectives, the teaching team employed strategies informed by four key concepts: interdisciplinary collaboration, community/university partnership, service learning, and professionalism.

- *Interdisciplinary Collaboration* – This class integrated scholarship and methods of inquiry from architecture, landscape architecture, and planning. Most of the work in this course was completed in teams that included students from all three disciplines. The faculty also worked as a team, for example, all lectures included materials from the three disciplines and three instructors participated in “desk crits” as a team.
- *Community/University Partnership* – This class is part of ESLARP which has provided resources and technical support to East St. Louis, Illinois’ community organizations for over 13 years. In return, the UIUC students and faculty have opportunities for innovative design, community engagement, and new pedagogical approaches. Mandatory student and faculty attendance at outreach weekends and monthly neighborhood meetings is an important component of this course and helps to sustain the long-standing community/university partnership.
- *Service Learning* – From the student perspective, this class aims to give real-world application to their academic studies. Students are providing technical expertise to a community organization while the residents are teaching the students about neighborhood dynamics, organizing, and getting things done. Student reflection on each outreach activity and their interaction with the neighborhood clients is an important component of any service learning activity.
- *Professionalism* – The work that students did in this class went to a client and will be implemented. While students may be learning through the process of the work, it is important to realize that the product must be professional and thorough.

EPILOGUE

Since the completion of this project, UIUC students and faculty have continued to work with SENDO to produce an urban design and neighborhood planning document that is ambitious yet practical. Although the proposal is a work in progress, the student efforts provided essential documentation and analysis that has already been a catalyst for positive changes, including improved infrastructure, a faith-based collaborative and ongoing community clean-ups.

NOTES

- ¹ See Sydney Brower, *Good Neighborhoods* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996). This was a required reading for the class.