

# Bridging Between Interior and Environmental Stewardship

DANIEL BUTKO

University of Oklahoma

A four-week elective course to design and build a children's playhouse benefiting Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) offered a pedagogical bridge between introductory ideas of design-build and research-based components of inhabitable space. This pedagogically adaptive project provided a learning environment where 1st – 5th year University of Oklahoma Architecture students vertically interacted with each other and faculty outside the constraints of the typical design studio, allowing diversity of theoretical approaches, material sensitivities, and organizational methodologies. The college-established budget of \$500 and short timeframe necessitated financial and environmental stewardship. Design initiatives were immediately focused on salvaged, donated, repurposed, and recycled materials with additional donations through personal and corporate allocations, resulting in an abundance of cedar, cypress, oak, and acrylic. The playhouse project explored the constant integration of critical development, craft, and fabrication, favoring fabrication as a real-time method of informing design and pedagogical decisions. This build-design hybrid provides opportunities for students to appreciate time and materiality as integral to design, developing connections between learning and doing. In addition, the project contained community-based collaboration to foster both contributions to society and initiate public involvement.

The team was bound by CASA's mandates for exterior use, a maximum 7'-6" x 7'-6" footprint and 8'-0" height, able to be transported in pieces for display, assembled by hand within a couple hours inside a shopping mall, on display during the 10-day raffle, disassembled and transported to the winner's home, and permanently reassembled on site. While working around OU's Creating\_Making Lab Monday – Friday hours, the physical testing, mockups, and construction were completed in a mere 19 business days. The atypical learning environment induced students and faculty to not only think outside the proverbial box for design creativity, but budget, schedule, safety, and modularity quickly became integral issues to the overall process. The ambitious team allowed creativity to offer an experiential alternative to preconceived ideas of specific form or style.

Labels and descriptive words conjure critical thought of how the intended function of a project influences the nature in which the project is developed and eventually occupied. Based upon the behaviors of children, the design team focused more on "play" (in the active recreational sense) than on "house", developing conceptual ideas into a multilayered interactive sensory experience - visual, physical, aromatic, and auditory - all facilitated through a place for children to climb, slide, and hang out. The project allowed

students to study the historical aspects of playhouses, compare sketches of rough ideas to accurate models and drawings, and validate concepts with truth in materials.

Materials, history, culture, theory, sustainability, budget limits, and technology were unified as cohesive elements of designing a particular inhabitable structure with a defined interior acoustical character. The team also had to think about adaptability for unknown site conditions and children heights. With this project as their single focus, the team was able to immerse themselves in the entire process without digression. The pedagogical objective was not merely a successful project, but to introduce students to various phases and stages of an inhabitable construct.

