Housing the Chronically Homeless: Opportunities and Challenges of a Community-Based Design Studio

KIMBERLY ROLLINGS
University of Notre Dame

Few evidence-based resources exist to guide architects and clients during the design of permanent supportive housing (PSH), especially related to creating healthy, supportive environments for vulnerable populations. An undergraduate architecture design studio partnered with a Northern Indiana PSH project team, architects of successful PSH, and existing PSH residents to propose an evidence-based, non-institutional, functional, healthy and safe PSH facility. Successes and challenges of the project and partnership are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

An undergraduate architecture studio partnered with a Northern Indiana community development corporation and local partners who received a grant to construct their county's first Permanent supportive housing (PSH) facility. PSH links safe, affordable housing with social support services that address challenges associated with chronic homelessness, addiction, and other disabilities. People struggling with chronic homelessness and associated challenges often cycle in and out of shelters and require costly emergency medical and public safety services. They also tend not to qualify for other types of housing. PSH helps to break this cycle so people can regain stability and move forward with their lives. Few resources, however, exist to guide architects of PSH during the design process, especially related to creating a supportive, healthy environment for such a vulnerable population. Students were asked to inform the design of the local facility by identifying and applying best practices to their own design proposals for the local site.

HEALTHY PLACES STUDIO & PROJECT OVERVIEW

The required, semester-long undergraduate design studio course consisted of eight fourth-year undergraduate students who completed one analysis and one design project in addition to the PSH design project. Instead of providing hypothetical projects lacking real-world constraints, clients, or impact, the studio focuses on human-centered design that promotes healthy, sustainable, and socially just environments. Design projects are also community-based projects. Students are challenged to integrate interdisciplinary design-health research with their knowledge of architecture and urbanism, and apply the combination to local, real-world projects. The PSH program included 32 one-bedroom apartments; a variety of shared and support spaces, including outdoor space and amenities; and strict accessibility and egress requirements. Project goals encouraged students to explore connections between basic human needs, social services, and the physical environment.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES & PARTNERS

Project activities included pre-design research; guest lectures about PSH, acoustics, low-cost construction methods and materials, and mental health and the built environment; community partner meetings; site documentation; and a visit to existing PSH facilities. Students extensively researched connections between architecture and physical, mental, and social health.[1,2] Additionally, they studied post-occupancy evaluation, observation, and interview methods in preparation for visits to two successful PSH facilities in Boston.[3,4] Given the lack of appropriate PSH precedent and design guidelines, visiting successful PSH examples in Boston provided students with valuable examples to study and inform their design proposals. Furthermore, since the local PSH project had not yet identified residents, students were still able to meet with PSH residents, enhance understanding of the design challenge, and incorporate resident perspectives into the design process.

The Boston trip consisted of an engaged two-day visit in partnership with The Narrow Gate Architecture, Ltd. (TNG), a firm that provides architectural services for underserved populations. Students completed systematic site documentation of two TNG PSH facilities and interviewed project architects, PSH staff, and PSH residents. PSH residents suffering from addiction, chronic homelessness, and disabilities also shared a meal with students which gave residents a voice in the design process. During the visit, students learned not only the role of the built environment in supporting a vulnerable population, but also that few architects ever have the opportunity to interview residents of PSH facilities. Meeting with the residents motivated students to assume ownership of their design project and desire to create successful and supportive facilities for future local residents.

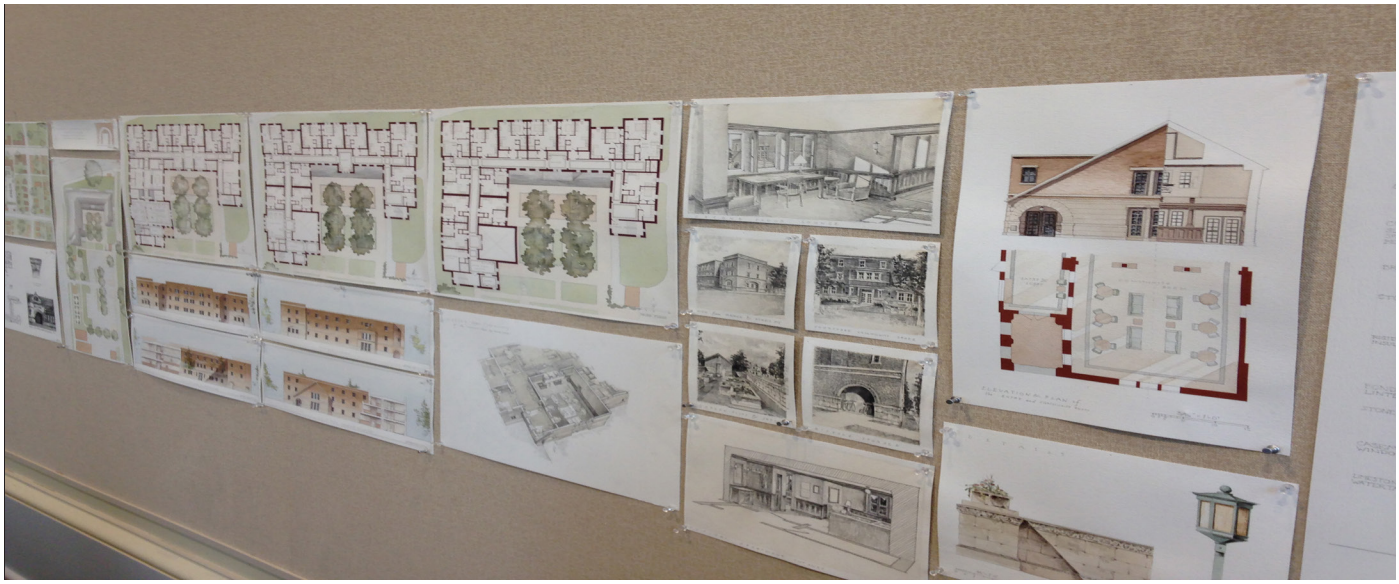

Figure 1: Creating a human-scaled facility that promoted a sense of comfort and independence was important to residents.

DESIGN APPLICATION

Students' design proposals focused on creating healthy, supportive, and empowering environments. Based on students' research, site visits, observations, and interviews, a set of evidence-based best practices were identified related to: privacy and social interaction, safety and security, restoration, control and independence, and identity and meaning. Students applied best practices to their proposals and shared the information with the local project team. Projects also addressed material durability and cost, universal design, green materials and native landscaping, and crime prevention through environmental design. Student work was evaluated via studio desk crits; midterm and final project reviews; and extensive feedback from faculty and the PSH team.

SUCCESSES

The PSH project and partnership provided a real-world experience for the architecture students. Project activities required learning to work with project constraints, articulating questions to obtain needed information, and communicating ideas to architectural professionals, project stakeholders, and PSH residents. The potential to inform local housing projects inspired and motivated students, and their work did significantly influence the design of local PSH housing and TNG projects in Massachusetts. The project also empowered both students and PSH residents. Resident input was sought and valued, and students' design suggestions were seriously considered and implemented by the project team. Student presentations also successfully emphasized the importance of including PSH residents in the design process of PSH facilities. TNG architects used the interview questions and surveys developed by students to obtain feedback from residents living in PSH facility that will be renovation by TNG.

CHALLENGES

Project challenges included interpreting complicated design requirements outlined by the local PSH project funding source; scheduling misalignment between the academic calendar and partner availability; and conflicting interests between developers and PSH resident case workers, especially related to safety and health. The complex project and partnership required flexibility and additional time commitments from faculty, students, and partners. Time was also required to address ethical and student concerns involving meeting PSH residents.

CONCLUSION

The studio project was well-received by students and partners. Partners incorporated student suggestions into their professional work. Students reported high levels of satisfaction and intellectual challenge. After discovering a lack of evidence-based design guidelines related to health and PSH residents, students compensated for the gap by using research methods to obtain user input and systematically evaluate existing PSH facilities. Final comments from students indicated that the real-world project experience, community partnership, and opportunity to meet PSH residents were valuable experiences that reminded them of why they wanted to become architects.

ENDNOTES

1. Evans, Gary W. "The built environment and mental health." *Journal of Urban Health* 80, no. 4 (2003): 536-555.

2. Evans, Gary W, and Janetta Mitchell McCoy. "When Buildings Don't Work: The Role of Architecture in Human Health." *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 18, no. 1 (1998): 85-94.

3. Zeisel, John. *Inquiry by Design: Environment/Behavior/Neuroscience in Architecture, Interiors, Landscape, and Planning*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Co, 2006.

4. Zimring, Craig. "Post Occupancy Evaluation: Issues and Implementation." In R. Bechtel & A. Churchman (Eds.), *Handbook of Environmental Psychology, 2nd ed.* (pp. 306-319). NY: Wiley, 2002.