

# Ghostlands Studio: Expeditionary Learning and Local Design Build in Response to America's Dead and Dying Towns

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This paper examines the historical and cultural causes and implications of population loss leading to dead and dying communities, specifically in the American Midwest, and presents the outcomes of a series of design-build studios conducted both as an investigation of and a response to the phenomenon. During the latter half of the twentieth century, small rural towns and farm communities throughout America's "heartland" have been slowly disappearing. Due to the shifting social, environmental, and economic landscape, population loss has plagued Midwest rural communities, as people move toward better opportunities in cities or as smaller communities consolidate into larger, more centralized towns. The condition has been dramatic enough to lead states like Kansas to record the ongoing population loss on an official Historical Society "Dead Towns" list, documenting over 5000 such places. Working with groups of architecture students during three studio courses over eight years, we developed a hybrid approach of expeditionary learning, public interest design, and design-build, leading to community workshops and small, built infrastructure projects in multiple dying "ghost towns" in the US states of Kansas and Iowa. Drawing upon historical research, conversations with members of the community, and experiences in traveling thousands of miles across the western United States to ghost towns both modern and ancient, students developed critical responses to immediate needs of communities such as town signage, outdoor gathering spaces, and micro-museums in an effort to mark and remember these disappearing places, rather than attempt to restore them. Although it was understood that many of these communities would eventually cease

to exist, projects were designed and implemented toward fostering community identity, reclaiming cultural space, and conserving collective memory as a way to celebrate the history and surviving presence of the people and place, while leaving a trace for future generations to consider. In addition to the standard design-build pedagogical objectives of site design, design detailing, and materials and methods of construction, students were exposed to the principles of public interest design, such as asset-based development, programmatic sustainability, and mutual benefit. An historical and cultural analysis of the phenomenon of dead and dying towns is presented here, along with an assessment of the studio experience, including an evaluation of community engagement and the design process, built work, and student and community feedback. This assessment evidences both the successes and failures of the pedagogical and practical strategies implemented and reveals the quality and effectiveness of a pedagogy of community-based design-build in the public interest of dead and dying towns.

## INTRODUCTION

I am a nomad.<sup>1</sup> Not like some traditional Bedouin, as described by Wilfred Thesinger in his *Arabian Sands*,<sup>2</sup> but, a new nomad, defined by global hypermobility, rootlessness, and an aesthetic and ethical reflexivity.<sup>3</sup> I feel akin to one of Richard Sennett's foreigners, painfully and unavoidably adaptive, unable to take for granted ways of life that seem so natural to natives.<sup>4</sup> Constantly on the move since birth and having lived in many places for no more than a few months to a year, I have become an eternal itinerant. Some of my earliest memories are of the road, in the backseat of the station wagon, head lolling out the window, mouth open, cheeks full of wind. Unlike the stereotypical nomad, I adhere to few borders, fewer memberships, and can be assigned to no fixed territory. I don't claim affiliations to nations or



Figure 1: Mackey school children. Mackey Historical Society.

governments, but to tribes, discovered, formed, and joined organically as I've moved. Conditioned by this instability, I have a ceaseless and almost nostalgic longing for home; a home I've never really known. In some way, all of my work revolves around the same themes of community, place, memory, and disappearance. I am captivated by loss, whether to time or to the horizon left behind me. I find myself perpetually in-between.

Ghostlands, a periodic series of design build projects between 2005 and 2013 acting in dead and dying towns in the American Midwest, was formed and firmly situated within this in-betweenness. During a year-long architecture studio at Kansas State University and two subsequent summer design studios at Iowa State University, working with more than 45 students over that time, we investigated the condition of dying towns across the US, connected with communities, and constructed small, infrastructural responses based on community feedback. Throughout the course of the projects, we experienced ironic, liminal dichotomies, such as how delving into the past can make you take stock of the here and now; how driving out into the middle of nowhere, into remote isolation, may be the only way to really find yourself; how experiencing that isolation

with others can form the strongest bonds of community; how losing yourself in the intense focus of building something can make you feel part of a much bigger picture and something far greater than yourself; and how coming close to death can make you feel more alive.

The following paper will describe our negotiations of these strange oppositions. First, it will present a brief cultural and historical analysis, both of the phenomenon of dying towns and of one of those places, Mackey Iowa, in particular. It will then illustrate and assess our expeditionary learning approach and the importance of travel, not just in learning, but in learning to make, and in learning to make do. Finally, back home in Iowa, it will describe our strategies for community engagement and developing the design process, and our tactics for implementing architectural responses. Rather than an effort of resilience, recovery, or rebuilding, our work was meant to mark and remember, to reclaim lost cultural space, conserve a vanishing collective memory, and to celebrate the people and places who came and have gone.

#### THE PAST

Oxford Dictionaries defines a "ghost town" as "a deserted town with few or no remaining inhabitants;"<sup>5</sup> but, can a deserted town have inhabitants? Information on dead and dying towns can be hard to



find and, when you can, there seems to be no fixed criteria for what defines a ghost town other than a varied combination of complex factors leading to population loss. Historically, reasons for population loss or abandonment in rural areas ranged from geographic location to climate, but were primarily political and economic in nature, although the death of a town is not typically a product of a single condition.<sup>6</sup> In the more recent past, major metropolitan centers have not been exempt to becoming ghost towns during the last century due primarily to the changing culture, the loss of manufacturing, and neglect, in places such as Baltimore, Detroit, and New Orleans.<sup>7</sup> Of course, like New Orleans, natural or man-made disaster can play a role, as in the cases of Picher, Oklahoma, which was wiped out by a tornado in 2008,<sup>8</sup> and Centralia, Pennsylvania, abandoned due to a lingering, toxic coal seam fire burning since 1962.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1900's, small towns and small farms across the Midwest were thriving.<sup>10</sup> Many now defunct towns were in their heyday, and there were more schools in Iowa than in any state in the US, leading to a local saying that once, while perhaps not the best educated, Iowa was the most educated place on Earth.<sup>11</sup> While World War I increased prosperity for Midwest farmers, the onset of Great

Depression combined with the advent of industrialized agriculture, led to a string of many economic hardships. Following World War II, the institution of a national interstate highway system leading to the decline of the railroad, the draw on the rural population toward major metropolitan manufacturing centers in search of better financial stability,<sup>12,13,14</sup> and the rise of agribusiness by corporations,<sup>15</sup> who ate up small farmers and cut the number of farms by 50% by 1980, while the average acreage per farm more than doubled. A dwindling lack of resources and infrastructure in rural areas led to increased incorporation and consolidation of townships and school and political re-districting to centralize government, so that by the end of the twentieth century farmers were less than 2% of the US population, with 90% of income for farming households coming from nonfarm sources.<sup>16</sup> Current factors leading to the death of Midwest towns are the aging population and "brain drain", in which the younger, educated population moves to urban areas looking for a different life.<sup>17</sup>

Although Mackey, Iowa, where the work presented here was constructed, had a post office, it was never platted as an official town. In 1971, it was organized as part of Harrison Township, named for William Henry Harrison, the ninth President of the United States.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 2: Expeditionary Learning Devil's Tower, Wyoming. Sean Davies

Mackey takes its name from Sebastian Mackey, a settler from Illinois and Ohio who moved to the area in 1856 prior to the organization of the township. The town grew up around farming and a small lumber industry and eventually had a sufficient population to support several businesses, a church, and a one-room school house, built first in the late 1850s and rebuilt in 1901 or 1902 for the cost of \$160.<sup>19</sup> Mackey reached its peak population in the 1920s and has steadily declined since, now home to fewer than a dozen people. As of the 2010 census, Harrison Township had a population of 354, of which Mackey is a very small part.<sup>20</sup>

### THE DISTANT

At some point, Ghostlands required that we get into a car and drive out into the landscape to where, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, “snapshots aren’t enough.”<sup>21</sup> Although it was a summer studio and was a fun thing to do, there was so much more to this intention than just taking a road trip. It cut through the heart of landscape and communities, while the long hours and days blending into days gave the students room to reflect and think. In the remoteness it brought them closer to themselves and to each other. They learned what and how to make. It was an act of what has become known as Expeditionary Learning, and it is not a new idea. Expeditionary Learning has its roots in the Outward Bound School, founded in 1941 by Kurt Hahn in Wales and brought to the US by Joshua Miner and Charles Froelicher some twenty years later, in which the entire educational experience is based on “a complete reorganization of time, space, and relationships among persons, across disciplines, between persons and learning technology, and between the school and community.”<sup>22</sup>

Founded on ten principles,<sup>23</sup> not the least of which are The Natural World and The Having of Wonderful Ideas and which, perhaps not coincidentally, correspond beautifully with the pedagogical goals of design build, Expeditionary Learning provided a framework to embed students in a rich process of self-discovery, diversity, collaboration, and giving. For the first two weeks of each of the eight-week summer studios at Iowa State, the students and I piled into a 15-passenger van and traveled two different routes out into the West, both in excess of 5000 miles. We camped the vast majority of the time, staying in motels fewer than a handful of times, cooked our own meals, packed, unpacked, repacked, and told stories most nights by firelight. We visited numerous abandonments along the way, both ancient and modern including Mesa Verde and the dying Route 66 town of Tucumcari, New Mexico, and stayed in more than 20 national and state parks along the way. Aside from their daily routine duties, the students were asked to journal, photograph, and to periodically stop to construct what we called “doppelgangers”, small compositions or devices made to mimic, mark, or better understand things they found significant in the landscape, made only from materials found in-situ.

There were successes and failures in the approach; two of the missteps being how the trip was structured in the second summer and the unanticipated reaction the students had to the impact traveling

had on the timeframe and, ultimately, their vision for the scope of the project. Because the enrollment during the 2013 studio was so large, we needed two vans for the trip, which led to some cliquish behavior, unhealthy competition, and made it more challenging, in a very short period of time, to develop a cohesive working unit. I experienced both summers that removing two weeks from an already impossibly tight schedule for what the students considered a superfluous trip, initially created an adversarial relationship between them and me, as they had preconceived notions of large-scale constructions which traveling made unfeasible. However, the time on the road provided ample time for me to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the group, for individual roles to develop, and for natural leaders to emerge. More importantly, it helped to develop deep and tightly-knit interpersonal relationships between the students who, both summers, came home as a team.

### THE HERE AND NOW

In a recent discussion with my students about our motivations and responsibilities concerning a design build project we are beginning here in the United Arab Emirates, one student suggested that my core reason for practicing design build was that I wanted to go out into the desert with a few students and make something. On a very personal level, she was right; but professionally, it’s much more than that. Although the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) has criteria for institutional design build, including collaboration, ethics, and community and social responsibility,<sup>24</sup> many of the 100-plus design build programs in the NAAB system focus primarily on student education and capital “A” architecture, with some known for their “signature” projects and architectural statements.<sup>25</sup> Between mitigating the practical and professional risks, managing the demands of shifting roles of practice and education, providing a transformational educational experience for students, and delivering a publishable and awardable architectural product, the concerns of the community can get lost.

Despite recent trends in academic public-interest, community-based, and design-build programs toward resilience and recovery,<sup>26</sup> our strategic goals in Mackey and the Ghostlands projects, in general, were complex and, for some even, bleak. Considering the extent of population loss and the inevitable extinction of towns like Mackey across the Midwest, it became clear that our strategy here must be different, more about marking and remembrance than resilience and recovery. Taking into account our limited resources, students were asked to look at dead and dying towns as a network, connecting them at large through historical data, oral history, and personal experience, while developing a language of small-scale, infrastructural projects meant to commemorate place. The studios were structured to include a combination of sociological and historical research and design build. Our intention was to execute the from many of the more elderly residents of the town. During the final four weeks, the team built a variety of small projects, including a town sign, bench, cemetery map and signage, a community table, and a reinvented replica of a two-seater outhouse, reimagined as a





Figure 3: Outhouse micro-museum, Mackey, Iowa. James Spiller.



micro-museum to house artifacts, images, and stories of Mackey's heritage. The Outhouse became the centerpiece of the site.

#### **BETWEEN RESILIENCE AND REMEMBRANCE**

Measuring the success, failure, or the impact of a design build project based in a real community can be difficult when the project is finished on time, under budget, and is occupied and used. Unless it outright fails in any of those categories, understanding the nuances of where it fails and succeeds can be hard to spot and can take a lot of time to uncover. Compounding the challenge are the numerous ways in which these kinds of projects must be assessed, including NAAB criteria; independent evaluating systems, like that of the Social, Environmental, and Economic Design (SEED) Network, which has criteria for community participation, transparency of process, and accountability;<sup>29</sup> the quality of relationships, post-project; the quality of student educational experience; the design, integration, and execution of building systems and components; time and budget; post-occupancy feedback from the community and how well the project satisfies the intended need or use; and wear-and-tear, maintenance, and the overall lifecycle concerns of the project in

subsequent years; not to mention the larger goals of community recovery and resilience, which have increasingly been the focus of conferences, journal issues, and academic faculty positions, in my experience, at least since the devastation in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

At first glance, we succeeded in a number of areas. The project was self-funded entirely by students using nearly one-hundred percent repurposed, reused, or recycled materials, with the exception of some hardware, on time and under budget; the team satisfied all aspects of the project, in terms of program and building components promised; all of the relationships within the Mackey community and between the team and the construction trade and supply community that were established and fostered throughout the project were positive, and remained so, in many cases, for years following the Ghostlands studios; at least three students continued to work in Mackey as designers and fabricators, under contract and for pay, following graduation; the project was a model of community participation, transparency, and accountability; official student feedback in course evaluations was extremely positive; course outcomes were



Figure 4: Installing town sign, Mackey, Iowa. Chelsea Britis.





Figure 5: Community table, Mackey, Iowa. James Spiller.

met with excellence; the project has required very little maintenance, five years on; and, if you ever have a chance to make it out to Mackey to visit the outhouse museum, I hear that the solar powered light still works.

In terms of recovery or resilience, however, the project was a complete failure. We knew that going in, though, and there wasn't anyone, in my opinion, on the student team or part of the Mackey community, who hadn't accepted, before anything had been designed or built, that the town and towns like it across the Midwest would eventually cease to exist. From an academic standpoint, not having a goal toward recovery, social sustainability, or resiliency make the project seem unnecessary or futile, and some of the students shared these concerns at the start. They quickly learned, however, that the Ghostlands projects weren't primarily academic, and that were about something more important than recovery and resilience, at least architecturally. Ghostlands was about things that can't be easily measured, like the perception of time, acceptance of loss, the celebration of memory, and remembrance. From the community's point of view, I don't think they really cared whether we

built anything, or not. Perhaps Mackey resident, Keith Carlson, put it best when he said,

"It felt like aliens had landed, and not in a bad way. After living a normal life for 80 or more years in the same place, you come think that nobody cares or notices your existence. Then, you all show up out of the blue and tell us that we matter. At my age, that means a lot."

What mattered most to them was just the fact that we were there. Possibly the most important lesson that the students learned, I hope, is that architecture can't save the world; but, that a caring, concerned architect can. They learned, I know, that Ghostlands was less about making buildings than building relationships. In that way, the projects succeeded beyond measure.

#### ENDNOTES

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