

Case Study: Five Points Alley

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A neighborhood redevelopment foundation approached the School of Architecture about structuring a community design process for Five Points Alley, a triangular plot of leftover space at the intersection of five alleys in a blighted urban neighborhood. The goal of the foundation was to ensure that community members have a voice in how this interstitial space could become a vital place for community activities in the very near future.

The students researched exemplary community spaces and crafted an exhibition on their findings that was held in a building abutting the alley. A broad cross-section of community members were invited to participate in an interactive session that addressed the potential programming of the alley. Students identified five categories of possible use: Make, Exchange, Connect, Learn, and Play. Large interactive posters identified exemplary projects for each of the uses. A video area was set-up for the community members to talk about the history and future of the neighborhood and alley. Students discovered significant architectural ornamental details in the neighborhood surrounding the public space and translated them into laser-cut acrylic panels. The colored panels were framed and back-lit, and were used to illustrate the potential role of light and color in place-making. The iconic positive cut-outs from the acrylic panels were used as tokens that corresponded to each category, and were hung at each poster. Participants in the exhibition were asked to vote by removing the icons from the poster and placing them onto a hand-crafted chandelier. The resulting large, urban-scale light fixture was hung in the public space of the alley as a record of the communities' participation in the planning process. The results of the voting illuminated several clear directives from the community:

1. The necessity for marking the entrances to the alleys.
2. The creation of infrastructure for exchange.
3. Maximum flexibility of program and use.

Drawing directly from the comments and results of the exhibition, students began working on full-scale detail prototypes that addressed the functional requisites gleaned from the results- namely lightness, mobility, flexibility, and transformability. Instead of working from object to detail, the students developed a repertoire of fabrication strategies that addressed the implicit construction issues embedded in these terms. An inexpensive, flexible module was developed that could be re-configured for a wide variety of possible scenarios. The resulting prototype was installed at the site as an interactive device to demarcate space and demonstrate potential use. The modules are designed to be aggregated, and can support a variety of activities that were suggested at the exhibition, such as pop-up retail, outdoor seating and storage area, biergarten, and lemonade stand. Edge-lit LED screens mark each alley entry, and utilize the iconography of Make, Exchange, Connect, Learn, and Play.

