urban collaboratory studio  carnegie mellon university

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In Spring 2019, the Urban Collaboratory Studio at Carnegie Mellon University’s School of Architecture with a collaboration with Community Forge, a citizen-led initiative that is transforming Wilkinsburgh former vacant school into a community and youth center. Community Forge is committed to youth-empowerment, community collaboration, organizational innovation, and neighborhood wellbeing. Together with community members, both young and old, the studio began transforming the former school yard into a shared resource for the wider neighborhood. In weekly participatory design workshops with Community Forge’s youth throughout the semester the studio supported the development of ideas and their translation into a coherent design strategy.

The resulting urban design framework proposes an archipelago of islands programmed for diverse activities. The islands will be implemented incrementally over time, depending on funding and volunteer work. Aiming at setting the transformation in motion, the studio realized the first island “the grid” that integrates games and sports in an educational landscape, as well as furniture elements sprinkled across the site. Here, design-build is not primarily concerned with delivering a product – but in fact, explores design as a tactical and performative tool for encouraging community engagement and setting in motion an incremental transformation process.

Overall, the studio offers fourth and fifth year BArch students an opportunity to see a very small project through from conception to realization within only 13 weeks, and contribute abstract systems thinking with very concrete and hands-on action. In the process of the studio, several at-risk youth were engaged in the transformation, some of whom are homeless youth. I am also working on launching my own business. Everything you do has the capacity to communicate their ideas clearly and the responsibility to advance design proposition that are not only feasible within real/situational and site constraints. In turn, the youth from Community Forge experience that they can have agency in shaping the built environment and change the neighborhood they live in. The method of urban acupuncture focuses on achieving tangible result quickly, in order to avoid planning fatigue common in disadvantaged communities. The experience of actual change within a short time span and minimal means is essential for building trust. While the proposed planning strategy allows for incremental implementation, the acceptance and excitement within the community has been phenomenal and has led to a sustained effort to realize the overall vision. Since the spring studio, volunteers have begun to realize the playground island. In Fall 2019 another design-build studio is developing the design and details for the Puncheu Porch. All parts implemented thus far have been instantly appropriated by the community and have significantly increased the use of the outdoors, as well as an awareness for activities happening outside the Forge.

COMMUNITY FORGE

POLITICAL GROUP

KABOOM!...EXCITED TO WORK ON THAT THIS SUMMER.

People in the neighborhood hang out a lot at Salvatore’s Pizza House and Wilkinsburg Beverages Co. Everyone loves the alcoholic slushies there. You know, little kids shouldn’t be in here training. So like, something like the Point State Park snack house, would be a good way to incite conversation with others and maybe even a stage would be nice too. People love to respond. Like, we have a lot of their all-star basketball courts, and I think we have a bunch of fences up and a lock on it. The resulting urban design framework proposes an archipelago of islands programmed for diverse activities. The islands will be implemented incrementally over time, depending on funding and volunteer work. Aiming at setting the transformation in motion, the studio realized the first island “the grid” that integrates games and sports in an educational landscape, as well as furniture elements sprinkled across the site. Here, design-build is not primarily concerned with delivering a product – but in fact, explores design as a tactical and performative tool for encouraging community engagement and setting in motion an incremental transformation process.

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Community Forge poster by Gautam Thakkar

Excerpts from semi-structured interviews with 25 community members

The Community Forge Youth Zone 2 real estate, restaurants, houses and Regent Square spaces. The tracks almost form like an actual separation between these two regions. People love to...
Impressions from weekly community engagement sessions with a focus on youth
The Wilkinsburg Heath Center is a valuable resource, located at the intersection of South Kesit Avenue and Center street. It was always a playground that was torn down for a while. Now it is rebuilt as a newer and more functional space, complete with more equipment. However, parents are reluctant to send their children there because of teenagers gathering and using the park in ways that are not conducive to a family-friendly environment. Ferguson Park, on the other hand, is not as friendly as it could be, but it is direct and without obstacles.

Urban acupuncture community Forge is a micro-urban public space that aims to address the lack of gathering space in Wilkinsburg. Fireside is adapted to become a mini gathering space, and the community keeps Fireside alive.

The Wilkinsburg Heath Center’s location in a busy area makes it a destination for all kinds of customers while keeping up with the operations in the city of Pittsburgh. There are employees working day and night. There are employees working day and night. However, the street front erodes as two continuous lots are vacant.

The Wilkinsburg area often shrouds houses and pathways with overgrown vegetation and trees on empty lots, along with the amount of greenery within the residential area. This creates a stark contrast to the empty family houses, which is a striking contrast to the empty lots which sit directly across from the Wilkinsburg Heath Center. Wilkinsburg, despite its location in a busy area, manages to stand the lack of gathering space in Wilkinsburg. Fireside is adapted to become a mini gathering space, and the community keeps Fireside alive.
Outdoor workshop exploring the surroundings of Community Forge

Conceptual design sketches synthesizing community input
**LEARNING ISLAND** realized with KABOOM! play everywhere grant

**Music Bench and Play Bench** realized with KABOOM! play everywhere grant

**Play Island** partially realized with volunteers in summer 2019

**Seating Island** pending on available funding

**Fitness Island** pending on available funding

**The Red Porch** design development in Fall 2019

**Time-line of incremental implementation**
Diverse feedback sessions: upper left session with engineers without borders / upper right stress tests of bench prototype with Xpogo 
lower left midterm review / lower right feedback at community barbecue
STANDARD
24' x 14' STAGE
BACKSTAGE AND TRUCK PULL IN AREA

CONCERT/FESTIVAL
COMMUNITY EVENT
EDUCATIONAL PLAYSCAPE

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Programming scenarios for diverse events
WHAT WOULD BE THE IDEAL STRUCTURAL DETAIL FOR ANCHORING THE SLIDE TO THE TIRE MOUND?

- SOFT RUBBER PADDING FOR SAFETY

WHAT WOULD BE THE CONNECTION DETAIL FOR THE SLIDE AND THE TIRES AT THIS POINT?

WHAT WOULD BE THE IDEAL STRUCTURAL DETAIL FOR ANCHORING THE SLIDE TO THE GROUND?

EXISTING TERRAIN

EXISTING RETAINING WALL

CONCRETE FINISH

PROPOSED RETAINING WALL

DRAINAGE AGGREGATE

12" THICK

VERSALOK STANDARD BLOCK

CAP UNIT ADHERES TO TOP UNIT W/ VERSA LOK CONCRETE ADHESIVE

DOUBLE STACK TO CREATE BENCH

2.5" FILL

3'-51/4" (1'-05/8"

1'-05/8"

1'-05/8"

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PHASE 1: The Phase 1 of Retaining Wall will include only a small portion of Versa Lok blocks as seating as marked in the drawing. Refer Phase 1 Master Plan for more details.

PHASE 2: The Phase 2 of Retaining Wall will include demolition of existing retaining wall, reconstruction of a new retaining wall using Versa Lok blocks along with bleachers and stairs and an ADA accessible ramp with seating.

Legend:
1. Lawn/Ground Cover
2. Rubber Mulch
3. Sand Pit
4. Pattern Island
5. Playground Island
6. Sand Pit
7. Tire Mound with Slide
8. Planting Island
9. Gym Island
10. Future Island
11. Seating Island
12. The Red Porch
13. ADA Accessible Ramp
14. Proposed Retaining Wall
15. Seating
16. Bleachers
17. Stairs
18. Sliding Gate
19. Pedestrian Entry
20. Dumpster
21. Planting on Slope
22. Music Bench
23. Play Bench
24. Planting Bench
25. Quiet Bench
26. Pedestrian Entry 2