At the Vital Center: The Small Town Studio at Ferris State University

PAUL W. LONG AND CHRISTOPHER L. COSPER
Ferris State University

Although the report is now 20 years old, Ernest L. Boyer and Lee D. Mitgang's *Building Community: A New Future for Architectural Education and Practice* is the most current major report on the state of architectural education and remains a source of inspiration today. In *Building Community*, Boyer and Mitgang agree with previous Carnegie Foundation reports that "higher education as a whole has lost its direction, that it is no longer at the vital center of the nation's work."[1] To address this deficiency, Boyer and Mitgang proposed seven goals for architectural education and practice, the seventh of which they termed "Service to the Nation." Although Boyer and Mitgang identified several examples of socially aware architecture programs (in the 1990s), they argued that "schools of architecture could do more…to instill in students a commitment to lives of engagement and service."[2]

This paper revisits Boyer and Mitgang's report, in particular its admonition that architecture programs "should educate students for both confidence and caring—in service to the nation"[3] and considers some of the critical reaction to that report. It then presents the work of the Small Town Studio at Ferris State University as a case study of an architectural design studio based on a service learning design pedagogy which has found innovative, low-cost ways to perform projects and engage students in the wider community despite omnipresent financial and time restraints.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

In their seminal report on architectural education, *Building Community: A New Future for Architectural Education and Practice*, Boyer and Mitgang call for an architectural pedagogy that integrally connects university architecture programs and the communities in which they reside. They argue students of architecture and their professors should collaborate in a culture of service and engagement, working with community partners to "develop new knowledge aimed at ensuring that the impact of design decisions on the health, safety, and welfare of communities is better understood."[4]

Building Community was the result of 30 months of research and writing. During that time, Boyer and Mitgang read earlier reports on the state of architectural education, reviewed scholarly work by architecture faculty, examined accreditation reports, joined an on-site accreditation visit, and visited 15 schools of architecture, interviewing faculty and students.[5] Boyer and Mitgang also visited 24 architecture firms to get the opinions of architecture school graduates and practitioners.[6]

Boyer and Mitgang proposed a framework for renewing architectural education and practice that is based on seven broad priorities[7]—the seventh of which they termed "Service to the Nation."[8] In urging architecture programs to "prepare future architects for lives of civic engagement,"[9] Boyer and Mitgang recommended architecture programs specifically pursue four aspects of service:

1. Establish a climate of engagement
2. Clarify the public benefits of architecture
3. Promote the creation of new knowledge
4. Stress the critical importance of ethical professional behavior[10]

Although *Building Community*'s evidence supporting the need for additional service opportunities was somewhat thin, subsequent research suggests Boyer and Mitgang were right to advocate for more service-learning in architecture programs. Walker and Seymour, looking at an interdisciplinary design studio they helped lead, found that

> 95.0 percent of participating students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Working with students and faculty from other university departments is important to my education"

> 97.5 percent of participating students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Working with guest critics and professionals is important to my education"
>
> 97.5 percent of participating students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "Working on real projects is important to my education"[11]

Other research suggests academic service learning based studios may improve students' design process, rather than inhibit students' creative impulses, as some faculty may fear. Cosper found in a design studio case study that

> 50 percent of students reported that working with a client significantly helped their design process
>
> 40 percent of students reported that working with a client helped their design process
>
> 10 percent of students reported no effect positive or neutral
>
> 0 percent of students reported a negative effect[12]

Walker and Seymour's research and Cosper's research help validate Boyer and Mitgang's position that academic service learning can and should be an integral part of architectural education.

REACTION TO *BUILDING COMMUNITY*

Building Community has been, and continues to be, widely influential, inspiring follow-up reports, much scholarship, and acknowledgement from the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Published twenty years ago, it is the most current major report on the state of architectural education and remains a source of inspiration today. The continuing relevance of Boyer and Mitgang's report is revealed by the currency of the documents referencing it, including the "NCARB Position Paper for the NAAB 2008 Accreditation Review Conference," the "AIA White Paper for the NAAB'S 2013 ARC," and *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice* 15th edition, published in 2014.

In many articles,[13] the reference to *Building Community* is brief, the authors using Boyer and Mitgang's work as a starting point for further exploration of architectural education. For example, in his article on architects who work in-house for large organizations, Schermer wrote:

> A focus on client-situated practice seems especially relevant for architectural education, given the Boyer Report's call for "constructive engagement" with the political, economic, and social context of architecture.[14]

Likewise, in their article on teaching students how to develop their collaboration skills, Bosworth III and Cuddeback wrote:

> In 1996 Boyer and Mitgang, in their expansive study of architectural education and practice, conclude that collaboration is necessary to enrich the profession, understand and promote diversity and "foster a climate of caring for human needs."[15]

In both of the aforementioned examples, the authors take the recommendations of the "Boyer Report" as givens and reference them to lend legitimacy to the issue at hand.

Other authors have been less sanguine about the value of *Building Community*. Robert Segrest, former chair of the Department of Architecture at Iowa State University, offered one of the harsher critiques:

> As an ethical document, the Boyer Report, now so called, is a reiteration of the idealized goodness of architecture (and architects); as a political document, as a guide for meaningful change, it is a placebo.[16]

Rejecting the seven goals of *Building Community*, Segrest provides "seven connected points of crisis."[17]

In his critical but more sympathetic examination of *Building Community*, William R. Dill found value in the report but had concerns about the lack of input from non-architects, specifically the lack of input from clients.[18] Dill wrote

> Its strengths are also its weaknesses. The book draws almost entirely on the view of architects and teachers and scholars of architecture….[19]

Whether referenced or critiqued, *Building Community* remains the most in-depth third-party analysis of architectural education, and its recommendations should be approached with appropriate gravity.

SMALL TOWN STUDIO OVERVIEW

While not directly created in response to *Building Community*, the Small Town Studio (STS) in the Ferris State University Bachelor of Science in Architecture and Sustainability seeks to fulfill Boyer and Mitgang's recommendation that architecture programs "should educate students for both confidence and caring—in service to the nation."[20] With a design pedagogy inseparably tied to community service and an ethical understanding of sustainability in the built environment, it has done so in an innovative, low-cost way that engages students in the wider community despite limited university and financial support.

The Small Town Studio (Arch 441: Architectural Design III – 5 credit hours) is taken fall semester of a student's senior year. It is the third architectural design studio offered in the curriculum and is required of all students pursuing the BS in Architecture and Sustainability.

Reflecting the implied nature of a degree titled "Bachelor of Science in Architecture and Sustainability," the STS seeks to embody a multi-scaler and holistic approach to sustainability and design education that educates future design professionals with a broad understanding of sustainability in the built environment.[21] In doing so, it recognizes the value of *Building Community*'s call for architects to "... be among the most vocal and knowledgeable leaders in preserving and beautifying a world who's resources are in jeopardy."[22]

The Small Town Studio was founded[23] on the belief that it is necessary to educate a new class of architects versed in a language of sustainability that includes social and economic considerations—in addition to the typical environmental focus found in many discussions of sustainability. This new class of architects will need to view architecture as a public good, and through lives committed to "engagement and service"[24] be prepared to make "life more comfortable, pleasurable, secure, and productive for all citizens, including the disenfranchised in our society."[25]

Inspired by the interdisciplinary City Design Research Studio in the London School of Economics Cities Programme (City Design and Social Science), the STS is based on an architectural studio pedagogy grounded in academic service learning, design research, problem-solving, communication, and ethics. This pedagogical framework, which is focused on working directly with community partners, integrates service learning and interdisciplinary research components into a design-based studio. The goals of this research component include asking students to:

1. Understand the relationship of architecture to the social and built environment;

2. Appreciate the complexities of place making;

3. Address design as a mode of research and practice that shapes the built and social environments;

4. Interact in an interdisciplinary manner with community members, professionals, and non-architecture students, with a focus that integrates the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of the built environment; and

5. Communicate to clients and communities, clearly and concisely in a public forum, the full implications of design proposals, with the goal of working towards a more sustainable built environment and better human condition.[26]

Following an initial research phase, students are asked to compile their findings visually, textually, and verbally. They then propose, in public forums and meetings, design interventions for their community partners' projects. This combined design/research[27] approach enables students to think holistically and critically about architectural interventions in relation to a site, the larger environment, sustainability, the community partner, and society as a whole. Following these public presentations, studio research and design work is compiled into a written and graphical document provided to community partners.

COMMUNITY DESIGN AND ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Gregory and Heiselt identify key differences between design studios and community design centers.[28] They describe community design centers as being run "like a professional firm" in a manner similar to "a full time practice that runs on grants," as opposed to a design studio where students have other educational responsibilities and are unable to work on "public interest projects full time." In this framework, the STS is a design studio, and not a community design center, as it does not have a full time staff and runs concurrently with other courses. However, it is somewhat unusual and differs from a traditional design studio—even a design studio which undertakes service learning projects—in that it exists as a dedicated academic service learning course.

This dedicated studio structure provides a degree of freedom over a design center model in that it does not have to "succumb to the pressures of financial efficiency" like a community design center."[29] It also provides greater freedom to pursue academic service learning projects, even those that take surprising detours, because of its clear mission dedicated to service learning. However, even with this freedom in achieving service learning and community partners' goals, the STS has had to overcome significant difficulties.

Within the context of its degree program, the STS is viewed no differently than all other design studios and receives no additional resources. It has no dedicated budget, no travel fund, no lab fees, no money for research, no staff, no student workers,[30] and no release time for its professor(s). The lack of resources does not prevent the STS from undertaking service learning design projects, but it does inform and limit the type of projects the studio is able to pursue.

The STS is effectively limited to projects which are planning, visioning, or research in nature, as it has limited resources to provide deliverables beyond digital or printed files. In some years, the studio faculty has been successful in receiving small (no more than $500) Ferris State University grants that help cover travel and printing costs for the deliverables provided to its non-profit—and typically underfunded—community partners. But when these grants are not available, students have helped cover the costs themselves.

In addition to limited financial resources, the STS is limited by the fact that Ferris is a teaching institution, not a research institution, and faculty have high teaching loads.[31] Having additional university responsibilities, and no release time, leaves faculty with little time available for administering the STS or managing student work. As a result, much of the work associated with administering the STS, pursuing projects, building partnerships, fund raising, grant seeking, and so forth, becomes additional duties. This situation is not unique to Ferris, but having no additional resources beyond those given to a typical course, lecture or otherwise, creates an ongoing difficulty and hardship that must be dealt with creatively.

SMALL TOWN STUDIO AND BOYER

In spite of these difficulties, the STS has been effective in developing an approach to design education aligned with *Building Community*'s recommendation that "[s]tudents and faculty alike should regard civic activism as an essential part of scholarship."[32] In the context of the Small Town Studio's pedagogy, Boyer and Mitgang's four strategies align with course goals to engage students with regional communities in the following key capacities: 1) Establish a climate of engagement *by supporting small towns*, 2) Clarify the public benefits of architecture *by promoting citizenship*, 3) Promote the

creation of new knowledge *by facilitating ideation*, and 4) Stress the critical importance of ethical professional behavior *through a holistic approach to sustainability*.

Establish a climate of engagement *by supporting small towns*:[33] The Small Town Studio has sought to instill a culture of engagement within its students by providing opportunities for them to directly engage with local community members and organizations. By working in an ongoing manner with organizations such as the City of Big Rapids and the Mecosta County Youth and Family Center, STS students are able to actively support community partners in a manner that helps the partners grow and develop in a sustainable fashion that they might not be able to achieve on their own.[34]

Community partners such as the City of Big Rapids[35] often wish to promote sustainable communities but have limited resources to be able to do so. Without support from an entity such as the STS, these community partners find themselves less able to fulfill their missions. The goal of the Small Town Studio is students serving Michigan's smaller and somewhat forgotten urban areas as they seek to grow and develop sustainably in a manner that contributes to a "more wholesome and happy human condition for present and future generations."[36]

An example of this work can be seen in the studio's development of a community plan for Mecosta Village. Working in an established relationship with two local community groups, Revitalize Mecosta and the Mecosta Youth and Family Center, students helped develop a village plan for growth that is socially, environmentally, and economically responsible. This led to a number of grant applications, including an application to extend a rails-to-trails connection to a regional trail and a department of transportation grant for rehabilitating the community's main street. Ideas generated by students also led to a village garden and a summer youth program at the Mecosta Youth and Family Center. This program enabled the center to remain open during the summer by paying local youth to work at the center on community revitalization projects. In a community with limited economic resources, particularly for the community's youth, this program continues to have significant social and economic impact.[37]

Clarify the public benefits of architecture *by promoting citizenship*:[38] As members of a pre-professional program in architecture, many Small Town Studio students will not become licensed architects; however, all STS students will be citizens of the world. Students may become mayors, school board members, or business owners who find themselves in positions of power within their communities. Given their potential to influence community design on many levels, STS students are asked to actively incorporate material learned in social science courses into their studio projects. These courses, which include Public Administration, Urban-Regional Planning, Community Studies, and Urban Sociology, give students a holistic theoretical background that considers the economic, social, and environmental concerns of the communities in which they are working.

Working directly with community partners and informed by these social science courses, the STS students are better positioned to understand how their design proposals (and the built environment as a whole) can provide a public benefit within the broader societies in which we live, knowledge that promotes the program's aim of helping develop better informed citizens.

P**romote the creation of new knowledge *by facilitating ideation*:**[39] The Small Town Studio recognizes its students are not design professionals and should not act in that capacity. Small Town Studio students do not seek to replace the necessary work of licensed design professionals within the communities they serve; rather, when appropriate, students act as intermediaries between a community partner and the realm of the licensed design professional. Students help communities ideate, define, and understand their place-based problems in ways the clients are unable to on their own. Students share with communities what is possible and how to proceed towards actionable solutions.

In an example project, from fall 2015, STS students were asked by the local chamber of commerce to help plan and schematically design a new community visitor center. The community partner had a very limited budget for construction and professional design fees and asked the studio to help reduce this burden by providing initial planning and design services. The students were also asked to help the community partner select between two possible constructions sites. As a result of the students' work, the community partner revised their building program and selected a design approach that fit within their limited budget. They also became aware that neither of their two proposed sites were tenable, so a third site was examined and ultimately purchased. The community partner is currently working with a contractor in a design-build capacity to complete the project based directly on a student's schematic design proposal. Without the work of the students and the knowledge they developed, this community group would have had great difficulty moving forward with the project.

Stress the critical importance of ethical professional behavior *through a holistic approach to sustainability*:[40] With its emphasis on a holistic understanding of sustainability, the STS seeks to emphasize to students the ethical responsibilities of the profession. An example of students taking these ethical responsibilities seriously can be seen in a 2012 bicycle and pedestrian plan for the City of Big Rapids.

Students approached this project with a holistic vision of sustainability and sought to implement a plan that would serve the City of Big Rapids in an environmentally, economically, and socially just fashion. During their analysis of existing conditions, which combined an income and social demographic study of the community in conjunction with a physical analysis of infrastructure, students quickly found that pedestrian infrastructure was abundant in more affluent areas of town but less available in the lower income areas of town. Students also found the affluent and less affluent areas of the community were geographically isolated by a river that bisects the town, a condition aggravated by a limited number of safe crossings. Using

this information, the students recommended prioritizing the City's yearly sidewalk maintenance plan to more efficiently provide a just, equitable, connected, and safe pedestrian infrastructure. This presents one example of how students took their ethical responsibilities seriously, presenting uncomfortable information to the community and their clients during a public hearing.

IMPACT OF ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING ON SMALL TOWN STUDIO

The work of the Small Town Studio is inseparably tied to the pedagogical concepts of Academic Service Learning (ASL) and is integrally connected to the ASL program at Ferris State University. Small Town Studio students engage with service learning in two key capacities: 1) Students work directly with community partners on architectural design and community planning projects in a service learning design studio capacity, and 2) Students conduct service and mentorship activities with a local youth and family center.[41]

The Small Town Studio's involvement with the Ferris State ASL program helps ensure the robust nature of its service learning component. As part of this program, written student reflections are required for each project, addressing the observed shortcoming that few academic service learning design studios include a required reflection component.[42] At the end of each project, students are asked to formally reflect in writing on how well their projects met both client's needs and course objectives, what was their project's areas of strength(s), and where did they see potential for growth.

These reflections are invaluable in revealing if the service learning projects help students effectively fulfill course objectives. It becomes apparent that the combination of the community projects with the opportunity for self-assessment and reflection creates a more impactful learning environment.

Students seem to consider these reflections a safe place to honestly critique their own work and indicate more awareness of a project's strengths and weaknesses. This can be seen in one student's reflection as he struggled to reconcile his experience in previous design studios with the realities of working with a real client. The student explained, "Although I understood all of their needs I did compromise on some to satisfy my own agenda. I could have done a better job convincing them of my view, or compromised less." He later elaborated

> I struggled finding the line between real client needs and architecture. I tried to balance the two but always find myself falling on the side of architecture. On the one hand I am OK with sticking to my ideas about the built environment and how we should approach it, but on the other it would have been nice to know that I can at least design "practically."

Another student similarly stated, "I feel like I met the client's needs pretty well but could have done better at making the project more realistic."

Student reflections often acknowledge the increased amount of work with community partners. One student noted, "If I could redo this project, I would have started working earlier and not procrastinated so much. I did not realize the amount of work that actually needed to it." And another added, "Working with a client opened a new area of architecture and added a level of difficulty."

While architectural design studios are traditionally known for a heavy workload, STS students acknowledge increased commitment to their community partners. Their reflections suggest this comes from not wanting to let down their community partners as well as from the fear of having to present their work in a public forum. One student recounted, "I practiced the presentation many times before the dry run in class, and the dry run was very useful that day, although nothing really prepares you for presenting in front of clients that you have spent so much time working on the project for." Another student commented, "I loved that we had a real client with real issues and the idea that one of our projects could be buildable. It made me care a bit more about the content of the project and whether it could really become a reality."

The comments above show students beginning to take their careers and their roles as citizens seriously—just the kind of results advocated by Boyer and Mitgang.

CONCLUSION

The STS works to fulfill Boyer and Mitgang's interrelated recommendations that students of architecture should be "prepared to talk with clarity and understanding to clients and communities about how architecture might contribute to...a more wholesome and happy condition"[43] and architecture programs should do more to "instill in students a commitment to lives of engagement and service."[44]

Based on our observations of student growth and client satisfaction, we believe the STS effectively meets Boyer and Mitgang's call to service. STS students demonstrate a more acute awareness of client and community needs after working directly with community partners on their academic service learning projects. Furthermore, clients benefit from the concrete results of STS projects, including successfully obtaining grants, establishing a summer youth program, and initiating a construction project.

The work of the Small Town Studio at Ferris State University provides a case study of an architectural design studio based on a service learning design pedagogy, which has found innovative, low-cost ways to perform projects and engage students in the wider community. In fulfilling Boyer and Mitgang's admonition to become involved the "vital center of the nation's work," the Small Town Studio shows that any architecture studio can be engaged in academic service learning, regardless of financial or time pressures.

ENDNOTES

1. Boyer, Ernest L., and Lee D. Mitgang. *Building Community: A New Future for Architectural Education and Practice*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation, 1996: p. 129.
2. Ibid., p. 130.
3. Ibid., p. 129.
4. Ibid., p. 147.
5. Ibid., pp. xvii-xviii.
6. Ibid., p. xix.
7. Ibid., p. 26.
8. Ibid, pp. 129-142.
9. Ibid., p. 28.
10. Ibid., p. 133.
11. Walker, Jason B., and Michael W. Seymour. "Utilizing the design charrette for teaching sustainability." *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education,* 2008: 157-169: p. 164.
12. Cosper, Christopher L. (Chris). "The Client-Based Studio: Meeting Pedagogical Needs and Serving the Community." Creating_Making Forum. Norman, OK: The University of Oklahoma, 2010: pp. 47-50.
13. Building Community has been widely cited since its publication. As of August 2016, Google Scholar indicated that the report has been cited 437 times.
14. Schermer, Brian. "Client-Situated Architectural Practice: Implications for Architectural Education." *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2001: 31-42: p. 31.
15. Bosworth III, Frank Maling, and Marsha Ruth Cuddeback. "Using Service-Learning to Develop Collaboration Skills." *Academic Exchange*, 2002: 183-187: p. 183.
16. Segrest, Robert. "The Architecture of Architectural Education." *Assemblage,* no.3 (1997): 76-79.
17. Ibid., p. 79. Many of Segrest's points are strikingly relevant nearly 20 years later.
18. Dill, William R. "Half a Loaf: Educating Architects for the 'Real World'." Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning 29, no. 2 (1997): 48-53.
19. Ibid., p. 49.
20. Boyer and Mitgang (note 1), p. 129.
21. Walker and Seymour (note 11).
22. Boyer and Mitgang (note 1), p. 129.
23. The first Small Town Studio course was held fall semester 2012.
24. Ibid., p. 130.
25. Ibid., p. 129.
26. Item #5 is grounded in *Building Community*'s recommendations (pp. 136, 140, 141) that architecture programs more clearly stress the need for students to be able to express themselves "in jargon-free English in public forums, or to clients" (Boyer and Mitgang, p. 136).
27. Students typical work as individuals and/or in small groups based on the needs of a specific project. A common approach is for students to work together as a class during the initial research phase of a project, compiling research jointly. This is typically followed by a design phase where students work individually or in small groups of two or three persons.
28. Gregory, Alexis, and April Heiselt. (2014). "Reflecting on Service-Learning in Architecture: Increasing the Academic Relevance of Public Interest Design Projects." *Globalizing Architecture/Flows and Disruptions: Papers from the 102nd Meeting of the ACSA*, 2014: 404-410.
29. Ibid., p. 3.
30. Ferris does not allow faculty to hire teaching or graduate assistants.
31. A full load for the primary STS Professor is eighteen contact/classroom hours a week.
32. Boyer and Mitgang (note 1), p. 130.
33. This expands previous writings on the Small Town Studio (Long, 2014) to include Boyer's and Mitgang's recommendations that architecture programs specifically pursue four aspects of service (see Long, p. 2 and Boyer and Mitgang, p. 133). In the context of this paper, the Small Town Studio's pedagogical goals are directly tied to Building Community's recommend aspects of service (Boyer and Mitgang, p. 133). Long, P. W. (2014). Working Toward a New Studio Pedagogy: The Ferris State University Small Town Studio. Proceedings Creating_Making (pp. 144-149). Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma.
34. In doing so the Small Town Studio seeks to act as a public service for the smaller urban areas found across Michigan through which a wide range of sustainable design and planning problems can be addressed.
35. The geographic home of the Small Town Studio is Big Rapids, MI. It is the county seat of Mecosta County. The city itself has a population of approximately 10,000, not including Ferris State University with a student population of 12,000, and is the center of a micropolitan area with a population of approximately 40,000. Big Rapids does not represent the type of urban setting which typically attracts the attention of architecture and urban design or planning studios.
36. Boyer and Mitgang (note 1), p. 129.
37. See Note 41 for further discussions of volunteer/service activities undertaken by Small Town Studio students in support of the Mecosta County Youth and Family Center.
38. See note 41
39. See note 41
40. See note 41
41. While not the primary focus of this article, these "other" required service activities represent a key component of the studio that warrants mentioning. In this non-design studio service capacity, students partake in out-of-class service projects and spend time with disadvantaged area youth using architecture as a vehicle to introduce them to the built environment. They also act as mentors helping the youth see the promises and benefits of pursuing a college degree. In this capacity STS students introduce the architectural profession to youth who might not otherwise consider architecture as a career.
42. Gregory and Heiselt (note 28), p. 2.
43. Boyer and Mitgang (note 1), p. 129.
44. Ibid., p. 130.