

Tuesday 7 February 2006



Model of Detroit Neighborhoods at the Lawrence Technological University Design Studio |

The Urban Design Lab

By: Dennis Archambault



February 7, 2006

There are three architectural firms with one client in common: Detroit. They are not firms that design skyscrapers, hospital complexes, or luxury condominiums. These firms design urban landscapes, are motivated by need as well as want and are informed by community consent. Their architects learn as they go – because they’re students and their teachers are researchers.

University of Detroit Mercy, Lawrence Technological University and, most recently, University of Michigan operate “design studios” like architectural firms to help community organizations redesign their residential and commercial spaces.



“Essentially, we’re structured to bring great design and thought to those who often do not have access to it,” explains Dan Pitera, executive director of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at UD Mercy.

Furthermore, a design center has the ability to study issues from an objective point of view, says Craig Wilkins, director of the UM design studio, located in a new facility in Midtown at the corner of Mack and Woodward. “Those kinds of research projects don’t have a specific client. The client is Detroit, itself,” says Wilkins.

Detroit, being one of four international cities highlighted in a German study on cities with population shrinkage, offers enormous opportunity for architects and urban designers to study not only the problems of the city, but solutions that will be applicable for other cities.

“We have the opportunity to rethink urban design in this city,” says Pitera.

Getting stakeholders involved

The UD Mercy design center was established in 1993 by Steven Vogel, dean of architecture. Three full-time faculty architects staff the center, along with other faculty who work on a project-by-project basis. Up to four students work on projects during each semester. They manage at least five projects a year.

Getting faculty and students to work with community leaders to forge architectural solutions unique to Detroit is key to the program’s success.

“We’re not going to meet a client one-on-one, then go in to design,” Pitera says. “We have an extensive workshop process that engages all stakeholders, whether it’s a neighborhood plan, a building, or a furniture design.”

Examples of UD Mercy’s projects include:

- NPower Michigan: UD Mercy designed the facility in downtown Detroit, which is the Michigan headquarters for the national nonprofit organization. NPower helps other nonprofits fulfill their missions by integrating technology into their daily work. UD Mercy architects renovated 2,450 square feet of office space.
- Mercy Education Project: A non-profit after-school tutoring program for female children, young adults and seniors, the project involved the transformation of 1,500 square feet into classrooms and snack area. “Many of the participants are intimidated by the ‘image’ of a school environment,” explains Pitera. “The design of their project does not find its ‘image’ from past schools, but from the activities of the space.”

Everybody learns

The process begins with the community’s “vision,” explains Joongsub Kim, director of the Lawrence Technological University Design Studio, located in Detroit’s New Center.

Kim says faculty and students ask, “What do you want for the neighborhood? What do you want your neighborhood to look like in 20, 30 years down the road?” I treat their vision like a hypothesis.”



Applied research tests the hypothesis as the design process moves along: the students learn, the community learns, the faculty learns.

“I combine research and design almost simultaneously,” says Kim. “You have to come up with a quick design and test it with people from the neighborhood.” He calls the process “social construction,” in which he not only teaches students, but teaches community leaders through experience and example.

Lawrence Tech's projects include:

- Parkside Neighborhood in Detroit: In collaboration with the Parkside neighborhood and Detroit Housing Commission, a master plan and focus site design guidelines for several key sites were developed.
- African American Female Leaders in Neighborhood Revitalization in Detroit: The design studio is engaged in community-based applied research involving several African-American women who have contributed significantly to revitalization of Detroit. The goal of the project is to raise public awareness regarding their contributions and to teach future professionals and scholars.
- Kid Cams: Children designing their neighborhoods: Middle school students in Detroit documented their own neighborhood with digital camcorders, developing their own ideas about their environment into design proposals and models for projects to improve the neighborhood.

Unlike classroom learning, students receive hands-on exposure to architectural problems. "Any given project area becomes a living laboratory for exploring fresh perspectives in community design, for fostering healthy cultural reform, and for revitalizing the urban environment," writes Kim. "The studio serves as a civic design forum for debating contemporary design paradigms, (and) developing arguments for new urban theories."

Some projects may not even involve wood, brick and concrete. In one instance, Kim and students taught young people about the importance of respecting their neighborhood. "One of the major complaints I hear in the community is that young people don't care; they don't appreciate their surroundings." Design studios must be cognizant of the complex social problems that impact urban design, says Wilkins of the UM program.

"Detroit is their laboratory, Detroit is their focus," Wilkins says. "It's a way to bring (faculty) into a place where there might be some synergy."

UM has long provided urban design services in Detroit, but from its Ann Arbor campus. By moving to Midtown last year, students and faculty experience the city full-time, at street level.

Service learning provides "an alternative view of the practice of architecture," says Wilkins. A graduate of the University of Detroit, Wilkins has also been a visiting research scholar specializing in urban architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Minnesota Design Center.

"Architecture has not always been the best friend to marginalized groups, so places like the (UM) Design Center can only help both its image and its product in the long run."

Detroit's academic design studios' impact grows – project by project, neighborhood by neighborhood. Students graduate with an enriched sense of urban architecture, faculty researchers build a body of knowledge of urban design solutions, and residential and commercial districts are redeveloped. The future of Detroit is "smaller and smarter," Pitera says. The challenge is to rethink the definition of "urban," in terms of density and diversity. "Places like New York, Boston, San Francisco are beautiful places, but they are past paradigms. No innovation is going to be happening in those (cities) except to fix little areas. "This city allows for innovation to occur; it celebrates what has been, but looks toward the future."



Joongsob Kim, director of the Lawrence Technological University Design Studio with students Dan Pitera of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center at UDM Model at the Lawrence Technological University Design Studio Craig Wilkins, director of the UM design studio

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