

Periphery at the Center—Everything but the *Building*

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Between Making and Representation

The scene for this narrative is the department of Interior Architecture at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The crux of this paper aims at contextualizing academic community-oriented design-build studios. Our department functions within a School of Human Environmental Sciences, not within a college/school of art or architecture. This situation would not be such a challenge were the curriculum centered strictly on the behavioral sciences, and exclude the aesthetic discourse associated with the arts (painting, sculpture and architecture). Our school's sister programs are Social Work, Human Development and Family Studies, Nutrition and Consumer Apparel and Retail Studies—not architecture or the building sciences. Our department's body of work includes both realms—the social sciences as well as aesthetic theory—but is predominantly inclined towards the latter. Though at first glance, this academic equation may seem “all inclusive”, it does present additional challenges for providing a design curriculum contextualized within the built environment.

The context of any design *project* is complex by definition and always implies extensive collaborations from a plethora of “intervenants” – a.k.a. individuals/organizations who hold a stake. Consultants, contractors, craftspeople, legal as well as financial professionals, clients and the intended occupants are all part of any given project. *In situ* design never unfolds in a vacuum; a myriad of environmental and physical conditions must be taken into consideration. By an incredible leap of faith, representation in design education nearly always steps in as the all-encompassing surrogate. We accept, by *convention*, that the complete *genomic* code for constructing complex organisms, such as buildings/interior spaces or product, is imbedded in its *blueprint*. In the arts, as pointed out by William Carpenter, “[...] sculpture or painting, the process of making is the generation of the work itself.”¹ In the built environment, this is seldom the case.

Hence, making the-thing-in-itself seems to be the best way to contextualize design explorations. In our department, *making* is making a strong comeback. Product, exhibits and even buildings are “going-up” full size – 1:1. It's as easy as *that* and I can hardly remember why we once insisted on *only* drawing things. In actuality, time constraints, associated costs, sustainability (a.k.a. extremely demanding on faculty and students) and the sheer availability of space immediately come to mind. One can only imagine the impact of educational design-build if only a mere fraction of student work was to actually be built! Would this be economically viable and more importantly, how would this affect design education? What is truly in the crosshairs here can be qualified as the “ancillaries” of design-build. The following prompted the ensuing reflections:

1. Institutions of higher learning are not geared to build, or even manage, educational design-build projects.
2. The construction industry, though very willing, is not structured to accommodate educational design-build projects.
3. The academic design studio is typically not prepared to undertake high-stakes design-build projects.

Everything but the building is a fragment from our department of Interior Architecture's short design-build history. What is mapped here are not the builds but the human interactions and mediations that truly drive the idea of making—or design-build—in education. The following text focuses on three recent design-build experiences at UNCG. Two were executed in the last 24 months; *Urban Studio o1 – 909 Dillard Street* and *Close to Home: Loewenstein + Modernism in Greensboro*. The third, *Urban Studio o2 – My Sisters' House*, is currently underway. Since each of these projects would necessitate a book or lengthy chapter to describe and dissect, the authors have chosen to coagulate the narratives under three headings:

1. n.i.m.b.y. or [Y]n.i.m.b.y.: “not in my backyard” or “why not in my backyard”
2. f.o.u.t[u]: “fear of unknown territory at the University”
3. [k]n.o.t.: “kash not on time”

Project Synopses

In *Learning by Building*, William Carpenter captures part of the argument contained herein: “The architect should not remain distant from the act of making. This is not to say that the architect must build everything, but the architect should not simply observe ...”.ⁱⁱ As a side note, from the authors' vantage point, the *métiers* of architect and designer are interchangeable.

Urban Studio o1 – 909 Dillard Street (909 Dillard) was the first design-build effort, in recent history, at the department of Interior Architecture and the first housing replacement project in the City of Greensboro. In the Fall of 2006, twenty students, under the direction of the course's faculty, designed and built an innovative home for a deserving, retired Greensboro couple. Students were predominantly women (UNCG is the former UNC woman's college) and undergraduates (save for one) with most having no prior construction experience.

909 Dillard began with an intense three-week design charrette, the studio met weekdays from one to six and many Saturdays. The rigorous charrette consisted of daily reviews with the client, faculty and city representatives. This phase culminated into a set of execution drawings for the city to review and ultimately issue a permit. Armed with the redlined drawings annexed to the permit (mere schematics), details were fleshed out by sketching on the various building substrate. Time spent on site was nothing more than an extension of the design process. The studio design-built a full basement, two-bedroom/one-bath, 1050 sq. ft. ICF (insulating concrete form) house, on time and on budget; while passing all building inspections on the first call. The entire effort unfolded within the course of one academic semester.



Close to Home : Edward Loewenstein + Modernism in Greensboro (Close to Home) was an exhibit design-build studio, with partners on campus and in the community. The experience provided students with an opportunity to conceptualize, design, and build a full-scale exhibit in two locations and a dozen [mod] moments placed in the community. Undertaken in the fall of 2007, the multi-sited exhibit featured the work of late Greensboro architect Edward Loewenstein. Alongside design-build activities, the studio incorporated planning for a full schedule of events, including gallery openings and activities taking place over month following. Close to Home represents an unprecedented collaboration between Interior Architecture, UNCG's Department of Art as well as a myriad of other university departments/offices, the Elon University School of Law and two community foundations.

Close to Home was primarily design-built by eighteen undergraduate students from an upper-level vertical studio and two graduate students from the Museum Studies Concentration. In addition, fifteen students from the History and Theories of Material Cultures seminar, forty-five students from the department of Art and eighty-four students from the History and Theory of Design 1 course also contributed to the experience. The ambitious endeavor was completed on time and on budget with four hundred people attending the opening reception and an estimated 2300 visitors at the two main sites.



Urban Studio o2 – My Sisters’ House (MSH) is the latest installment of Urban Studio. This community oriented, service-learning effort will culminate in a 4500 sq. ft. home for five mothers and their children. The self funded endeavor will be design-built by UNCG students, as well as students and instructors from the carpentry program at *Guilford Technical Community College* and by urban studio’s director. Urban Studio is spearheading the multi-disciplinary project with *Youth Focus* of High Point as its community partner and with the City of Greensboro’s *Department of Housing and Community Development* providing the land. The \$525, 000.00 project is funded by the *North Carolina Housing Finance Agency* through its *Supportive Housing Development Program*. A cutting edge program for teenage mom housing is being developed jointly by *Youth Focus*, the Departments of Social Work, Human Development and Family Studies and Nutrition at UNCG’s School of Human Environmental Sciences, the Communication Sciences and Disorders Department at UNCG’s School of Health and Human Performance and the Child and Family Research Network at UNCG.



n.i.m.b.y. or [Y]n.i.m.b.y.?

Due of the nature of community oriented design/build efforts, “not in my backyard” attitudes or sometimes “*why not in my backyard?*” nearly always comes into play. For 909 Dillard the latter was most prevalent. More often than not, we are asked how and why were these recipients, the Marshalls, selected to have their home *replaced*. Urban studio was not responsible for choosing the Marshalls; the City’s department of *Housing and Community Development* chose them. In this case, the house situated at 909 Dillard Street was at the top of the City’s priority list. In fact, Urban Studio’s proposal came at the exact moment HCD had resolved to demolish the Marshalls’ home and place a prefabricated unit in its place. In light of this, the second home on the list was probably not in a much better state than 909 Dillard.

In the case of Close to Home, numerous and simultaneous sites were involved. Most of the various hosting locations were very receptive to featuring the well-crafted installations. However, one of the two main venues was the exhibit gallery at the *Maud Gatewood Studio Arts Building*,

home to both the departments of Art and of Interior Architecture. The resistance, by the department of Art, to Close to Home's use of the gallery nearly overwhelmed the other project partners. Fortunately, the design review group, put in place at the very beginning, along with three art faculty members, who pledged to utilize some of their class time to support the exhibit, mitigated this impact. Departmental turf wars made it very difficult to schedule the gallery, even with ample lead-time. In the end, though Close to Home was scheduled between two Art exhibits, and with very little time for installation and disassembly; the Maud Gatewood Gallery exhibit unfolded without issue. When you are given lemons, you make lemonade. The restrictions from the Department of Art about access to the space challenged the students to design a set of prefabricated components that could be assembled quickly on site (six-hour installation at one location, ten-hour installation in the other).

Group homes—especially for teenage mothers and their children—are ideal for n.i.m.b.y. protests. In the case of MSH, a facilitated discussion with Greensboro's Eastside Park neighborhood took place prior to Urban Studio's involvement. The community did not only welcome the project, as a revitalization effort, but the City sat on available land on which to build MSH. Urban studio was proactive in securing the funding and site for this project. Nonetheless, a diplomatic protest did occur in the form of *not in their backyard* by a respected Civil Rights activist who sits on the Greensboro's Redevelopment Commission. This commissioner felt that these mothers deserved to raise their children in a *good* neighborhood rather than one in transition. Obviously, everyone did agree. However, since the site was available, the project supported by the neighborhood and met the funding agency's requirements, the Redevelopment Commission proceeded with the land disposal. Supportive housing for teenage mothers in North Carolina is overwhelmingly under resourced. My Sisters' House will only address 15% of the need for housing which can accommodate a teenage mother and child for an extended period of time in Greensboro.

f.o.u.t[u]

When planning an academic design-build studio, especially one that operates off-campus, the fear of the unknown is always a challenge. One might expect the maiden project to have paved the way for subsequent endeavors and perhaps, even generate a model for these. Actually, since the nature of each project is completely different, it is very hard to apply previously gained experience. Each studio requires the involvement of different organizations and individuals. For example, changes in UNCG's upper administration have created unexpected challenges in the preparation of MSH. Since 909 Dillard was the first design/build in recent history at UNCG, everyone, from the department head to the University's legal Counsel needed to wrap their heads around this academically unorthodox proposal. Liability, rearing its many potential heads, was at the forefront of concerns. From student injuries to construction defects, each potential pitfall was scrutinized by the University administration[s].

Close to Home encountered several challenges from UNCG's Office of Safety during the build, especially during prefabrication. Though the Interior Architecture department has a very decent wood prototyping shop, there exists no space for the assembly of large pieces. Students responded to this by working wherever they could, including hallways and studio spaces. In the end, the Office of Safety negotiated for space with the Department of Art and the students converted their own studio space into a storage location. At stake was the alleged infringement of

egress paths. The Office of Safety also demanded specifications and information on a portion of the exhibit that was installed in the gallery lobby. Once delivered, the Office of Safety approved the project's lobby installation.

In the case of MSH, sufficed to say that the project is the first of its kind at UNCG. Unlike smaller residential design-build projects, the level of coordination required for MSH is simply monumental. The initial apprehension for the University was once again liability. The project's budget and value has required uncharted ways of addressing the State of North Carolina *Tort Claims Act*. The *Tort Claims Act* regulates compensation responsibility for state agencies. In addition, Urban Studio was required to formalize, with contractual agreements, its partnerships. Legally acknowledging and protecting each stake holder's responsibility has been challenging task. Meetings with all of the participants, or their representatives, were the only way to overcome the many "catch twenty-twos". For example, the University requested proof of funding up-front from the community sponsor, while the Funding Agency's key requirement was a signed agreement between the University and the community sponsor prior to awarding the grant. Trust was much easier to come by face to face than in an email.

[k]n.o.t.

For both Urban Studio projects, funding was secured creatively through HUD via community sponsors. For 909 Dillard, the City of Greensboro granted Urban Studio the maximum amount of money usually earmarked for the rehabilitation of a house. The City maintains a rehabilitation program that addresses the issue of homes that have degraded beyond the owner's ability to do the required repairs. The state of these homes is usually between a handful of code violations and condemnation. Urban studio contractually agreed to build a new house with the frugal amount of \$43,400.00 + a 15% contingency. MSH was funded through a grant from the *Supportive Housing Program* at the *North Carolina Housing Finance Agency* (also HUD money). In this case, the competitive grant was obtained by leveraging Urban Studio's pro bono services and labor against the required 25% matching funds. Payment structures for the grant required the University stepping-up in order to bridge the gap between the funding agency's conditions and the general conditions of a design-build construction project.

Close to Home, on the other hand, was funded through a series of grants. The project director raised the \$22,000 budget in advance of the project. Community volunteers also assisted with Close to Home's funding. Because of University restrictions, community foundation grant sources could not be approached directly, necessitating a complicated application process. Though successful, without this outside funding, the project would not have come to fruition. In addition to external funding, the department of Interior Architecture, School of Human Environmental Sciences, Office of Service-Learning and Office of Undergraduate Research at UNCG also contributed. This "town and gown" alliance has opened the doors for future projects that deal with a myriad of community issues.

Community based design-build projects require creative funding practices. Whereas industry or institute based funding usually follow higher education research protocol, academic design-build projects must also comply with well-established construction industry structure. These added challenges spawn creative solutions to current community and design related issues. With minor adaptations, these solutions are relatively easy to implement in the "secular" world.



In the End

Undoubtedly, the act of designing is akin to one of mediation and not of *ex nihilo* creation. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez eloquently writes "the practicing architect always had to "adjust" the dimensions of the work according to the site and purpose of the specific task, in the "thick" present of execution." ⁱⁱⁱ Besides "attuning" a design to the "thick" present and to the site, one must also address the long list of necessary "ancillaries" that a *design* of materiality un-conceals.

Evidently, the academic design studio is not intended as an exclusively *professional* environment; at least not one which operates solely within *les règles de l'art* of a trade or profession. ^{iv} Educational design-build studios must navigate the same situations as typical construction industry projects. An aseptic version of a "real" project includes client expectations, funding, site appropriation, permits, inspections, budgets, inclement weather, delivery errors, etc. In the "director's cut" we would add, incompatible accounting practices, competing departments, injuries, student frustration, racial/ethnic misunderstandings, jealousy, promotion and tenure expectations, more inclement weather, less than cooperative civil servants, etc. Situations, in design/build efforts, appear in a rapid-fire succession and not in small controlled doses. Unlike the classroom, unpredictability in the field is very much part of the studio experience. Though some situations immediately reveal themselves to the class, most are taken care of by the studio instructor—a.k.a. the principal investigator and faculty.

Earlier this year, the homeowners of 909 Dillard called because their toilet had stopped working. This deficiency was the first since the house was built. The toilet bowl was a donation, relieving the plumber of any responsibility. The next day, the director of Urban Studio stopped by the *Home Depot* to get parts and proceeded to repair the faulty toilet – a \$7.00 repair. It was really nice to see the home well lived in. Again proving that one must be prepared for anything.

ⁱ Carpenter, William J. *Learning by Building*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997) 19.

ⁱⁱ Carpenter, William J. *Learning by Building*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997) 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Perez-Gomez, Alberto. "Hermeneutics as Architectural Discourse", *FOLIO 05*, edited by Li Shiqiao, (Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore: Singapore, 2003)

^{iv} tr.: the rules or rulebook