

The Storefront Studio: A Community Classroom on Main Street

The Storefront Studio is dedicated to investing the academic capital of the UW Department of Architecture in close partnership with the social capital of local communities and the economic capital of their governments. Our goal is to identify the existing physical, cultural and historical assets of a community and provide preservation and development strategies for strengthening emergent identities, economic growth and social interaction.

Beginning as a graduate architecture studio, operating out of a vacant storefront on a beleaguered shopping street near the campus, the studio has gone on to do work on the 'Historic' Main Streets of small communities throughout King County. Architecture Students and Faculty work in collaboration with City Planners and Economic Development Officers, Downtown Associations, Chamber of Commerce's and the King County Historic Preservation Program.

By setting up shop in donated main street storefronts, the quarter long studios, host a series of public open houses, exhibits and information exchanges to develop a visual analysis of the host city's historic main street. Through archival research, photographic documentation and digital collages the students generate before-and-after streetscapes and individual building renovation proposals. An asset map is prepared identifying opportunities for preserving historic character and promoting of cultural tourism and economic development.

Business owners, property owners and residents provide feedback to the students and help to shape and influence the development of the students' work. The ideas are illustrated with computer-altered photographs of individual buildings and lead to proposals for a complete facelifts of the entire Main Street. These full color images show the current assets of downtown districts transformed with ideas for enhancing economic vitality through new development and historic renovation and enhancement.

The vision for Main Street that is generated in the first phase of this project is then condensed into a proposed set of Design Guidelines. These guidelines have the dual goal of maintaining the existing historic character of the pedestrian oriented Main Street while encouraging new development. They are proposed as a tool for the community to use to guide historic building renovation, new construction and to assist in the development and implementation of design standards.

To date, the studio has worked for the University District in Seattle, White Center, Auburn, Renton, and Skyway. The cities of Kent and Des Moines are already scheduled and there is now a waiting list. An examination of the success of this Main Street studio focuses on the confluence of several related innovations; digital tools, studio location, sustained duration, and community and academic interaction.

In architectural education, the idea of moving out of the academic ivory tower and into the community began during the counter culture revolution of the sixties. The innovation of this decade is to bring the current digital revolution to the storefront table. The new mobility and accessibility of cell phones, laptops and wireless, further enabled by large format plotting and digital projection, fuels wide band, high speed public interaction and communication. From Photoshop facade renovations, to website message boards, the storefront studio offers a digitally amplified and engaged version of 'taking it to the streets'.

The open house venue of the storefront, combined with the speed and relative low cost of digital printing, means that a fully illustrated public exhibition can be mobilized in a matter of days. The storefront becomes meeting room, studio, theater, and gallery. A van equipped with sawhorses, doors and plastic lawn chairs pulls up, and a second van with twelve students, each with laptop, cell phone and digital camera follows. The visibility and immediacy of the commercial storefront on the main street of the community is the second key to the resonance of this program.

The Storefront becomes an exciting attraction to the community with an extended period of engagement. A series of open houses replaces the brief duration of the charette brainstorm. By allowing a second and third wave of participation, the investigation broadens and deepens. There is time for sustained communication. Released from the constraint of needing immediate solutions, the proposals become emergent, multi-voiced and productively contradictory. Design work includes streetscapes, individual storefronts, urban design and public open space proposals. The students observe physical and social fabric under change. The biggest change is often in their own vision, moving from first observations to in-depth discoveries. The resultant emergent program for historic preservation and economic development becomes the final key.

If only briefly, the studio becomes a fully wired, fully engaged public practice, where the architecture student unlocks the doors, sweeps the public sidewalk, and opens for the day. Their mission is to preserve existing historic and cultural assets while promoting economic vitality.

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