

Ethical Practice and the Storefront Studio

Educational Opportunity

In Spring Quarter 2003, twelve UW Architecture students and I set up studio in an empty storefront in the beleaguered heart of the University District, a community in economic transition. Housed in a former music store on the main shopping street, we were excited to establish and operate an outreach studio, which we called the Storefront Studio. The students successfully engaged in urban design, historic restoration, community engagement, client consulting, architectural design, construction documentation, design-build construction, production management, exhibit design and web design. The Storefront windows became the threshold of exchange that showcased both the exceptional professional skills of the students as well as- and equally valued by the community- the student's ability to articulate the inspirational vision of a collective dream.

In The Storefront Studio, and follow-up independent studies, students examined the physical and social community and assisted in reinforcing the connections between the two. First examining existing conditions, and then the past in archives, and the future as predicted in published planning studies and development projections, each student, got to know the street and the people on it, the existing potentials and latent assets, From this base of understanding, the students envisioned a future streetscape and engaged in a lively collaboration with diverse building owners and family businesses. The larger community was engaged through open houses, complete with sidewalk displays and participatory votes on preferred alternatives for street façade improvements and pedestrian amenities. The local press and City Hall covered and engaged in the studio and published its activities. The success of the first Storefront Studio has led to a model and methodology, which has been taken to main-streets in White Center, Auburn, Renton, Skyway, and Kent. City Councils have approved budgets for future Storefront Studios in Des Moines, Carnation and Snohomish.

The Storefront Studio is based in the Department of Architecture at the University of Washington, but defines itself beyond the literal boundaries of the campus. It invests the academic capital of the university alongside the social capital of local communities to produce meaningful tools for economic transformation. The storefront has become a showcase of public exhibitions, and a teaching laboratory for community-based architecture, urban design and preservation. It is a real world practicum of an ethical architectural practice operating at the overlap of two scales, the pedestrian street and the public building. From the first open house the Storefront Studio has brought together architecture students with an array of influences from business, resident and community associations, city and state departments, and the media to create an emerging vision of design in the service of economic and social revitalization.

Main Street Outreach

The goal of the Storefront Studio is to bring a visible economic and social vitality to the historic main streets of local communities. What drives the studio's ongoing success is the engagement of the architectural students' professional and creative skill in the context of potent real world applications. By initially discovering the potentials and existing assets of each community, architecture and urban design proposals emerge from the unique context of each town. The defined scope of work is broad in each Storefront Studio to avoid anticipating a particular outcome. Emergent projects develop into sets of strategies for both historic preservation and economic development through incremental growth. Public infrastructure proposals are configured as a catalyst for civic change. Proposals for

individual property improvements work as seed developments. In the architecture and open-space proposals developed in the Storefront Studio, there is equal emphasis on the physical setting and the social activity. Interventions attempt to generate pedestrian activity in addition to enhancing it.

In each location, using research and communication skills, and focusing on the existing condition of the main-street district, architecture students develop a map of existing assets, detailed design proposals for interventions and general use and design guidelines. The long-term aim is to provide easily understandable tools to assist the community in guiding and promoting revitalization. In the shorter term, façade renovation plans are developed to test historic district and downtown district design guidelines. Owners are provided with drawing packages to assist them in finding local contractors to budget work.

Student-led speculative proposals become the inspiration for community-based initiatives, often assisting in generating the point of departure for an actual project. To create an immediate interaction between students and the community, posters and murals are digitally designed printed and installed in the street, appropriating the forums of advertising and popular culture. Large-scale printing enables the architecture student to present by billboard. On a more permanent, but equally immediate basis, modest design-build projects and follow-up construction projects provide the invaluable feedback of self-evident physical transformation and the rewards of concrete results. The work and educational opportunity continues after the studio moves out of its temporary location in each district, with ongoing façade projects, traveling exhibits, web archives, and follow-up city contracts.

Postcards and Posters

As a prelude to extended archive, interview, field mapping and Internet research, each student goes to the Main Street and, using digital photography and collage, creates a postcard of the community. Literally in the format of the tourist icon, they are asked to imagine a 'wish you were here' message with a community highlight, altered or fabricated on one side and a first person place description on the other. Exhibited together, they cards form a compelling montage of the place that generates insightful discussion between the students and the community.

This simple exercise launches students forward into a field application of the academic readings they have done in urban theory class. The Storefront Studio becomes a forum for applying readings such as William White's 'The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces', Kevin Lynch's "Image of the City" as well as the messy vitality and 'eyes on the street' urbanism of Jane Jacobs, and the socially enabling 'multi-centered terrain' of Herman Hertzberger. Working with existing main-street structures, the studio often works in Historic Landmark districts on façade restoration issues, particularly in relation to new development.

Engaged Research

After completing the postcard project, each student undertakes individual research focused on the Main Street context. These are pre-professional exercises in investigation, documentation, analysis, and communication. Open-ended and self directed, the investigations represent avenues of deeper research within the real world opportunities of the studio. One student's study of bench locations led to observations on the importance of informal or found seating, another's study of sidewalk-level signage inspired the design of a better sidewalk sand-

wich-board sign. Students' interviews of pedestrians have resulted in desktop edited movies with the compressed communication power of television commercials and music videos.

Students come to understand the context and synthesize new ideas from their reflection on community-involved issues. After an immersion in social activities, including an inventory of the festivals and events already celebrated in the area, students create a proposal for a street festival. They plan a "missing" event, design and present a poster promoting it, and place it on view in the community. The collective output of the students becomes an accumulated portrait of the social life of the street. A proposal for a graffiti festival for White Center was actually staged as part of a community clean up, complete with DJ.

Asset Inventory

A final compilation of the research phase of the studio produces a palimpsest map of potential community assets, both physical and social. This inventory of strengths emerges out of the collective set of student observations and community interaction and becomes a base to begin building incubators of growth. The resultant constellation of opportunities becomes the collection of sites for design interventions, testing possibilities. Some of these become fundable projects others, propose strategies for implementation future growth occurs. The aggregate of these individual projects forms the model for a broader set of design guidelines for incremental growth.

The Street of Dreams

An exploratory project in each Storefront Studio is called "The Street of Dreams". Working from a photograph of an existing building or streetscape, the students are encouraged to propose a renovation, assuming a radical but believable shift in the current condition. The core aspect of the proposal must be possible to implement. A parking lot turns into a farmers market. A 70's façade is partially removed to reveal a 30's façade. New development steps back at an existing cornice line. Each student selects a building, open space or streetscape detail, photographs it, and through digital collage, creates a portrait of a transformation. Empty stores become thriving corner markets; sidewalk cafes flourish and dark streets become brilliant with life. Digital photo editing programs and poster-sized printing give these visions very high legibility and credibility. Collages of existing buildings with digital overlays become both compelling and comprehensible to the community. The studio walls of the once empty storefront become a gallery of continuous public display extending into the street. The Street of Dreams is an effective tool of engagement, often initiating a dialogue towards a more fully developed pragmatic proposal. The speculative project allows the student to use their energy, optimism and vision to inject life back into the tired reality of the street.

Open Doors

After setting up the architecture studio in the empty storefront on Main Street, and an initial open house with the first showing of the postcards, research, and the Street of Dreams projects, a list of clients and officials is compiled with the help of city and local business community associations. Stakeholders are identified, contacted and invited to the studio. One student acts as the point person for each potential project. Initially, each student takes lead on one project and is a team member on one or two more. This evolves over the course of the studio

with some projects developing steadily while others become active with increased community feedback or interest. Students shift to the most productive and rewarding projects. This pattern matches practice and, along with the sense of discover in each new community, contributes to a very active and engaged studio with an unpredictable but always successful outcome.

The fluid studio structure enables an energized hybrid that combines architecture office and campaign headquarters. Flexible nomadic furniture is rapidly deployed and reconfigured. The physical space shifts from workroom, to seminar room to public gallery. Doors on sawhorses serve as tables and the ubiquitous classic white plastic lawn chair as seating; these are complimented with laptops, wireless connections and cell phones. The campus motor pool provides the passenger van. The walls fill with fresh output. More general open houses, often timed with other community events to capture their draw, bring in the public. At the University District Street Fair hundreds of people voted for their favorite of sixteen mural designs proposed for the side of a building. The resultant mural enlivened an empty street corner for over a year until the store was leased and a new business filled the window.

The Storefront Studio 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 the student's own vision, moving from first impressions and preconceptions to in-depth discoveries.

Design-Production and Design-Build

The digitally designed and fabricated mural, using billboard-printing technology has been an important way to shift production from the desktop to the street. Students in the studio have designed and project managed several murals with an average budget of \$5000 and developed entire building wraps with sponsored budgets of \$30,000. The first installation wrapped 125 feet of empty storefront at a key intersection in the University District. The second, in Southpark, was 85 by 12 feet, and involved a spirited community forum and Christmas party where several of the student proposals which combined. A third project in White Center is 110 feet long and 8 feet high. Running along at sidewalk level, covering a blank factory façade, it tells the history of the area while composing the factory building's skylight product into a dancing New Year's dragon. Highlighting cultural diversity, and bringing community pride to an area of neglect, the mural faced a small café, whose façade was redesigned by the students, a project that has now been built. Both projects involved the students directly in the city funding process, client consultation, community engagement, design and contract documents, construction budgeting, and construction reviews. They can still visit these projects, years later. Similarly, a two-week design-build project by the students gave the University District's YMCA a new lobby entry-gate, newspaper stand and front desk. Three years later, it is still in use welcoming each visitor. In White Center the students added to the farmers market infra structure with the fabrication of two portable market entry pylons. Students from the Storefront studio were also responsible for the design of the painted metal street light banners lining White Center's Downtown District.

Budgets and Permits

At a final open house, at the end of the quarter, students in the Storefront Studio present façade and streetscape designs to owners, community members, and city officials. Projects range from urban design master plans for downtown districts, to streetscape design guidelines for historic district, to detailed designs with contractor estimates for individual façade renovations. In some cases these proposals are used to generate funding, in others they have preceded to construction. Projects have included renovation work on historic theaters, shoe stores, a ballet studio, a pub, office buildings, a hardware store, restaurants and bookstores. In the summer, a core group of students often continues on projects. Funded by city, county, and private business, the student has the opportunity to follow through with their designs by working on construction grant applications, historic area design review, building permit drawings, and working with small contractors and fabricators on pricing and details. The students' main-street studio space is occupied rent free in exchange for supplying the owner with student generated as-found drawings and renovation proposals.

Sustained Interaction

The Storefront Studio is a platform for sustained and varied dialogue with the members of each community. Originally growing out of a proposed weekend workshop, the studio has become an evolving forum for investigating ways to invigorate communities. In each location the studio starts with establishing a street presence. The students then provide a sounding board for the issues and dreams of the community. People can drop in at open houses, or when they are in the neighborhood. Business owners can come in when there is a break in their day. Students meet with clients who are cleaning their hands on aprons as they come to the table. The studio also provides a neutral venue for community groups, who have used the studio's storefront for meetings, networking and as a civic platform for media events.

Public Practice

In addition to providing students a real world scenario with clients, building officials and actual construction budgets, the studio highlights the positive impact the University, College and Department can have on communities. It also demonstrates how effective students and faculty can be in these contexts. The Department of Neighborhoods, The Office Economic Development of the City of Seattle, and the Mayor's office have been ongoing in their support for the studio. King County Historic Preservation and Office of Economic Development have provided funding. The studio has also partnered with the City of Auburn Planning Department and the Auburn Downtown Business Association. In Renton the studio worked with both Planning and Economic Development Departments, local business provided project funding, and the Fire Department was a client. In White Center, a festival has been staged, three business facades have been renovated, and a community mural installed, and permanent street banners line the street. Currently the Parks Department in Kent has the land, the budget and the construction crew, and is looking for the studio to provide the ideas for downtown improvements. Next in line, Des Moines has tasked the studio with a public art and community identity program. The Storefront Studio has grown from a program providing architectural design support for façade improvement to a non-profit public source of community service and ethical architectural practice.

Future Work

The media have covered the studio in local and regional newspapers and on community television. Papers have been presented at national architectural and regional planning conferences. The Business, Development and Planning communities have spread recommendations by word of mouth, leading to a wait list of hopeful small towns. Interest has spread from city to city and from department to department. King County has prepared list of potential communities. Three cities have budgets in place and are being scheduled. The Studio has been partially funded by each community, with additional revenues projected. A website has been launched and is under expansion. The material for a book has been assembled. Direct discussions for collaboration within the college have involved proposals with faculty from Landscape Architecture and from Urban Design and Planning, and the same opportunity with Construction Management exists. Small scale but comprehensive architectural design projects are part of each studio. The storefront studio model has the potential to interact with existing centers and certificate programs in the areas of urban design and historic preservation. Connections to design build studios and labs have equal potential for synergy. The storefront public forum venue means that issues of representation and exhibition are always being explored, and a public exposure assured.

The storefront studio is unique, not only for its digital amplification of a street level architectural activism, but also for its intuitive fit to an existing problem, and the unpretentious implementation of an ethical practice of architecture. The open house venue, using the opportunity of a vacant storefront turned into a studio, combined with the speed and scale of digital representation and production, means that a fully illustrated public exhibition can be mobilized in a matter of days. The skills of the students and faculty ensure that message's value and reception. The Storefront Studio offers a successful model of education, community service, and the local investment of a truly sustainable resource, the academic capital of the students and faculty of an architecture school.

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