BIG CLASS WRITERS’ ROOM
AT SYLVANIE WILLIAMS COLLEGE PREP

A Collaboration With
BIG CLASS
And
The Albert and Tina SMALL CENTER for Collaborative Design at Tulane School of Architecture

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1 research
about site
skill building
The mission of Big Class is to cultivate and support the voices of New Orleans’ writers ages 6-18 through creative collaborations with schools and communities.

Big Class began in late 2010 as a series of class projects completed by first-graders at Lincoln Elementary School in Marrero, LA led by educators Doug Keller and Heather Muntzer. As word of the projects spread throughout New Orleans, several teachers reached out to Doug about the need for similar work in their classrooms that would highlight marginalized student voices and give under-resourced youth opportunities to explore their creativity and improve their writing skills through project-based learning and volunteer support. Recently Big Class partnered with 826 National, a network of youth writing nonprofits.

One of Big Class’s biggest in-school programs is The Writers’ Room at Sylvanie Williams College Prep which serves 350 students annually. It offers students a safe, quiet place to collaborate with volunteers, write, and get feedback on their writing.

Since 2010, Big Class has served more than 3,500 youth through dynamic, innovative, free writing programs supported by over 400 volunteers.
New Orleans has undergone radical shifts in education since the storm (2005). 80 out of 85 public schools are now run by private companies as charter schools with varying success rates, student demographics and geographic reach, and management structures. These schools are operating in a system where test scores determine their livelihood; and with schools teaching towards the test there is less room for creative programming and humanities. Big Class and other programs like it are an attempt to address these issues in specific schools.

Big Class located a Writers’ Room in Sylvanie Williams Collage Prep, a charter school on Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. The school population ranges from pre-K to eighth grade. The Writers’ Room space is a 22’ x 33’ classroom with a central partition which divides a school storage closet from the Writers’ Room space. Students entering the Writers’ Room had to first walk through the closet teaming with supplies to get to the creative writing space which was furnished with various available tables and chairs and enlivened with murals by Milagros.
Architecture students learn to use tools and to think-through-making early in the semester. A series of shop tutorials get them up to speed on safety and skills, while a series of ‘making’ exercises forces them to develop a more thorough understanding of materials, connections, scale, durability, and the relationships between design concepts and spacemaking.

READINGS AND DISCUSSION

In addition to basic fabrication skills the design team spent the first few weeks immersed in readings by the Big Class youth, readings about the education landscape in New Orleans, and about Public Interest Design and the role of designers in society.
READING LIST

> Whitney M Young’s 1968 Address to the AIA National Convention
> The Color of Reform: Race, Education Reform, and Charter Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans. by Dixson, Buras, and Jeffers
> Teaching to Transgress; Education as the Practice of Freedom. by Bell Hooks
> We Have to Tell Our Story; Neo-Griots, Racial Resistance, and Schooling in the Other South. by Kristen Buras
> Design for Equity; and introduction. blog by Katie Swenson and Barbara Brown Wilson
> Design for Equity; language. blog by Christine Gaspar and Liz Ogbu
> Design for Equity; civil rights. blog by Theresa Hwang

MY POETIC PIZZA

I live in New Orleans flying high, singing songs you might see me flying by, sometimes it will be in the fall, nothing will ever make me fall.

-- Hiyanta, 4th Grade, Samuel J. Green Charter School
2 design process

engagement
concept
prototyping
proposed schemes
final design
The design process began with discussion. First the design team attempted to understand the charter school landscape in the city and how non profits like Big Class serve students within this context. What need is Big Class meeting? What is the state of classroom spaces within Sylvanie Williams? Do they represent well designed space, and space that is meeting the needs of the students? What additional needs do the students have that can be addressed through design?

This project provided the opportunity to build a space specifically for kids and the Big Class writing program; a chance to build a space which fosters creativity and helps to build confidence and excitement in the learning process.

Throughout the design and fabrication process, design students engaged stakeholders through various methods including volunteering, observation, discussion, surveys, design feedback, and an open dialogue about the opportunities and approaches to creative space.

“Visiting the school gave us the chance to talk to the teachers and the students about what they would like to see in the space and get some one to one feedback. These preliminary studies helped us narrow down to a few key needs and wants for the space which we carried through to the final product.”

-Paula Bechara, design student
Through a robust process with Big Class staff, students, and volunteers the design team established a program, the wants and needs of stakeholders, and focused on desired qualities of space. Themes of transformability, comfort, and continuity were developed throughout the iterative process.

The students and teachers wanted a room that contrasted the sterile atmosphere of other classrooms. The Writers’ Room represents a break from the daily routine and should offer inspiration, comfort, and celebrate the act of writing.
PROTOTYPING
Design ideas went through prototyping to test their feasibility and functionality in real life. By building half-scale and whole-scale prototypes, the design team was able to test out how ideas about materials, form, and connections would work in the writers’ room space.
**PROPOSED SCHEMES**

**RIBBON:** One continuous ribbon defines and enlivens the space while housing all programmed spaces of the room such as seating, lighting, and storage.

**COZY NEST:** A series of snug spaces to learn and teach, with a covered canopy rich with warm wood tones and material texture to evoke a treehouse.

**TRANSFORM:** This scheme focused on active moving parts which create flexible space. When pulled apart the moveable ‘ribs’ create smaller writing zones. The scheme also holds large areas of wall space for interactive writing and pin up space.

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**COMBINED STRATEGIES**

**storage** integrated into a single design move

**lighting** for atmosphere which is part of a material rich canopy strategy, in addition to the default classroom lighting

**seating** a strategy that accommodates personal seating as well as larger group writing

**display** ample space given to writing surfaces, pin up surfaces, and book display
FINAL DESIGN

THRESHOLD  FORMAL WORKSPACE  INFORMAL WORKSPACE

HALLWAY  CLOSET  TEACHERS LOUNGE
The final design scheme incorporated student, staff, and teacher feedback from previous ideas into a single strategy where a series of fixed ‘ribs’ define the Writers’ Room space while providing storage, seating, lighting, as well as interactive writing surfaces. Additionally, the materials, color, and textures mark this space as a creative and joyful space designed specifically for youth writers and their desires.
3 build

project timeline
construction
writers’ room at SWCP
team
**PROJECT TIMELINE**

**ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES**
- RFP Selection and Pre Design Meeting
- Student Writing Prompts
- Research and Observation
- Pre-Class Volunteering
- Focus Group with BC Students

**DESIGN STAGES**
- SUMMER 2016: Studio Prep
- FALL 2016: Skill Building
- JAN 2017: Preliminary Design
- FEB: Design Review
- PROTOTYPING
- Share with previous D/B students
- Final design
- Final design review
- Prototype testing
- BC staff approval
- Prefabrication
- Site install
- Trim
- Final review
- Opening celebration
CONSTRUCTION

partition wall demo

material sourcing

routing ribs

table fabrication

transporting shop fabricated pieces
“From our first meeting through every feedback session and logistic navigation we’ve been totally blown away by this process and the finished product. You truly listened to students and their community, and the result speaks for itself. Know that this room has electrified our practice, and we’re so thrilled to put it to grand use offering students at Sylvanie profound opportunities to write, create, and be heard for years to come.” - Doug Keller, Director of Big Class
Design and construction of Big Class Writers’ Room in collaboration with the Small Center and Tulane School of Architecture faculty and students. Sponsored by Johnson Controls, Inc.

STUDIO TEAM

SMALL CENTER
Emilie Taylor Welty (design lead), Nick Jenisch (project manager), Sue Mobley (engagement advisor), Maggie Hansen, Donn Peabody, Shoshana Gordon

BIG CLASS
Ashley Teamer, Doug Keller, Eliza Walker

SYLVANIE WILLIAMS COLLEGE PREP
Alexis Adams, Christopher Ramage, Tyrisha Martin

REVIEWERS
The students, teachers, and volunteers of Big Class at SWCP. Kentaro Tsubaki, Emily Baker, Charles Jones, Seth Welty, Kristen Zeiber, Sam Richards, Marcella Del Signore Kati Dvorak, Evan Wagner, Jonathan House, Sara Harper

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