INTRODUCTION

The Small Center team worked with Groundwork New Orleans to design and build an outdoor classroom, entryway, and event space to enhance the Earth Lab’s visibility and functionality for its educational programming.

Groundwork New Orleans’ primary location on St. Claude Avenue was visually inaccessible due to high fencing, which did not allow the organization to provide a welcoming presence to its neighbors and visitors. The built intervention is intended to open up the site and give a bold visual identity to Groundwork’s programming, allowing the site to more effectively host school and volunteer groups for hands-on field trips and other activities.
SITE CONTEXT

New Orleans’ eclectic and vibrant historic housing, small commercial development, an elementary school, and a community-oriented mixed-use building called The Healing Center make up the site’s immediate context. The Marigny is a vibrant, walkable neighborhood between the French Quarter and Bywater neighborhoods, and features a mix of residential, neighborhood commercial, and mixed-use corridor development. The site’s context was a critical part of the design challenge; Groundwork New Orleans sought to open up its activities to the neighborhood and invite those who had never seen the site to participate in existing programs or even rent space for their own events.
Historic housing in New Orleans’ Marigny neighborhood
The design team drew inspiration from the St. Claude streetscape and Healing Center mural overlooking the site.

(OPPPOSITE)
Site conditions at Groundwork New Orleans
Groundwork New Orleans engages local residents, businesses, and government officials to revitalize neighborhoods and transform community liabilities into community assets. At the core of its programming is youth development through job and life skills training, and Groundwork hires youth and young adults to build and maintain its projects. Since 2006, it has focused on neighborhood-based best management practices, implementing projects that mitigate stormwater threats while improving quality of life, restoring ecosystems, and contributing to a healthier watershed that includes surrounding wetlands and delta estuaries. These projects include installing rain gardens and bioswales, beautifying communities and improving urban drainage infrastructure.
Site conditions at Groundwork New Orleans
Students assessed Groundwork’s L-shaped site which frames three commercial properties located in historic houses. The site holds the corner of St. Claude Avenue and Spain Street and was designed to manage rainwater not only falling on the site, but also to hold and manage water from the enormous flat roofs of the nearby Healing Center (seen opposite as a mass of grey).

When Groundwork was first established on this site, a bioswale was installed to manage on-site and off-site water, allowing it to infiltrate rather than flowing into the over-burdened municipal stormwater drainage system. The excavated dirt was used to create two mounds which helped define the site, but also hampered some activities. The primary site feature the design team was asked to address was the lack of a street presence. Permitting requirements, including the site’s location in a regulated historic district and relocation of an active gas line rounded out the project’s list of challenges.
The iterative design process was conducted in collaboration with Groundwork staff, leadership, Green Team, and Ground CREW. Over the course of eight weeks, the team held traditional design reviews, brainstorming sessions, on-site public events, and Skype sessions for remote input. An interactive site model allowed for both students and Groundwork to move various elements around to test ideas and interaction with material test products and mock-ups allowed everyone to see the potential for various materials, forms, colors, and textures.
(AT RIGHT)
One design proposal explores site organization, entryways, and colorful permeable pavers to create a formal gathering space on the site.

(OPPOSITE)
Students, faculty, and partners consider and discuss a number of design options.
PLANNING & DESIGN SCHEMES

A variety of design solutions were produced to investigate the organization of the site and explore possible improvements to support a variety of aspects of Groundwork’s day-to-day activities. While the built project could not tackle every issue discovered, the team endeavored to create designs that would address some of the biggest issues identified by Groundwork and its users: entry to the site, a formal event space, compost, and planting beds.
The iterative design process was enhanced by the studio’s focus on representation techniques. Students researched graphic precedents and employed a variety of methods to represent their ideas to their peers, community partners, and the public. Paired with the use of interactive models, the suite of graphic techniques allowed a variety of participants in the design process to understand and interact with the design ideas in several different ways, leading to valuable conversations towards the selection of a final design.
(OPPOSITE & ABOVE) Plan and elevation studies representing a new “front door” for the Groundwork site.
MATERIALS & PROTOTYPING

Students researched the strengths of a variety of concrete types appropriate to the proposed structure. They experimented with dimensional patterns, textures, surface molding, and integral dyes to achieve the desired material aesthetic and performance while considering client uses, historic district regulations, and soil type.

Students’ material investigations included research, prototyping, and performance testing. Focusing on concrete, these included strength testing, aggregate density, fabrication efficiency, and finishes including aesthetic patterning, shape, and polish.
**FINAL DESIGN**

Working with a custom dyed and layered concrete system developed in the first half of the semester, the primary structure’s walls form an “outdoor room” suitable for gatherings large and small. The team then constructed a new fence and gateway entrance, collaborated with Groundwork students to build new planter beds, and built a new contained compost area. The project also addressed site layout to optimize use of the L-shaped lot, including organization of storage and composting systems, leveling to achieve more open space for gathering and events, and implementation of custom, hand-made permeable pavers to provide a solid working surface while demonstrating the water management principles of Groundwork New Orleans.
(ABOVE) Students hone their technique through scaled prototyping
CONSTRUCTION PLANNING

Including engagement, design, and construction, the team spent approximately 16 weeks in Fall 2018 to complete the project. Given the tight timeline and permitting process, students created a precisely designed and executed construction schedule. They created innovative formwork and staging to accommodate the use of hand-poured concrete, a method necessary to achieve the desired aesthetic.

(OPPPOSITE) Section drawings show the scale of the proposed walls in comparison to adjacent buildings.
Students constructed the project in less than four weeks, benefitting from a focus on precise graphic representation, close collaboration, and dedication to providing the partner with a completed project while minimizing the interruption of programming. The team poured large footers to support the primary walls, hand-dyed and poured the walls, constructed gates and fencing, worked with Groundwork’s student Green Team to construct new planter beds, built a new compartmentalized composting system, and conducted leveling, storage organization, and other site work.
Site excavation, pouring reinforced wall footers, building formwork, and hand-pouring the main walls.
COMPLETED PROJECT

The project was completed in December 2018, making it ready to accept the spring cohort of Groundwork students and employees. With new additions to the Earth Lab, Groundwork can now hold events in a formalized “outdoor classroom” area. A new fence and colorful gateway provide a welcoming street presence, allowing neighbors and visitors to see the Earth Lab and understand its purpose. The project reinforces Groundwork’s intent to welcome its partners and the wider community to participate in its educational activities and programming.
Project Location: 2342 St. Claude Ave, New Orleans

Project Year: Fall 2018

Partner Organization: Groundwork New Orleans
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