METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

in Public Interest Design *at the* Albert & Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design

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METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

This document outlines engagement methods used by the Albert & Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design at the Tulane School of Architecture. Over 13 years, and in more than 100 projects across the City of New Orleans, Small Center has practiced deep engagement as a means of creating collaborative, high-quality design projects responsive to the needs of New Orleans' neighborhoods and residents. We believe in widely sharing our methods, practices, successes, and failures so we can learn from a productive dialogue addressing the need for and approaches to Public Interest Design.

WHO WE ARE

The Albert and Tina Small Center for Collaborative Design is the community design center of the Tulane School of Architecture. In partnership with, staff, students, and faculty, we collaborate with the leadership and constituents of partnering nonprofit organizations throughout New Orleans. Our partner organizations bring their project ideas to us, and we bring our design expertise to bear in collaboration, supporting New Orleans residents in imagining and pursuing projects that strengthen neighborhoods and contribute to a city shaped by its residents.

Having worked with community and interdisciplinary partners on a wide variety of projects from research to design/build, Small Center is well-positioned to share lessons learned in the conduct of public interest design.

AFFORDABLE
FOR WHOM?
MEET YOUR NEIGHBORS
Speaking of Families
Why does it matter?
1725

WHY DO WE ENGAGE?

Community engagement is a key element of public interest design, which takes as its goal design as a tool for creating a better world for the people who happen to inhabit it. So we're interested in buildings, the built environment, and in space broadly, but we're really interested in the social use of space. Our goal is to create a framework for engagement that can thoughtfully interrogate social and physical contexts, challenge underlying assumptions, and design with, rather than for people. We have a process that helps to correct for a tendency as designers to jump too quickly into solving spatial issues *alone*, highlighting submerged issues that need to be addressed or reoriented as explicit questions.

For Small Center, operating within an institution of higher learning, that process starts before the semester begins, when our team works in collaboration with client organizations to frame the design question, scope, and context of the project. By including our clients' organizational leadership as part of the design team, we engage more authentically in community-driven design, increase opportunities for learning for all participants, recognize the broad range of expertise held by partners and their constituencies, and counter difficulties in getting honest feedback. This also helps to reframe the audience for a project by targeting end users and other stakeholders rather than just the client, and ideally by making associated design decisions and program assessments a shared effort.

So how do we get there? We do a lot of looking, listening, and researching.

OUR VALUES

At our core is an understanding that shaping our built environment is an interdisciplinary endeavor. Our team is composed of people with collective experience spanning the disciplines of architecture, anthropology, planning, political science and public health. We believe this interdisciplinary approach strengthens design and its positive impacts.

We all have a right to shape our world
But some of us have more power and privilege to bring to bear in that shaping. We all have a responsibility to shape the world towards justice and to use whatever standing we have, along with our training, talents, and knowledge to do so.

Everyone brings expertise to the table
Everyone. Engagement is often framed in terms of “the community” which reduces individuals to a mass, and often frames that mass as an obstacle to be overcome or placated. The woman who spent 35 years in a classroom, marched for voting rights, raised three children and runs every fundraiser for her church isn’t an obstacle, she’s a person with a distinct history who has a wealth of organizational and management experience.

We bring our best selves when we bring all of ourselves
It matters that we hold the individuals around us as whole and complicated people, it also matters that we do the same for ourselves. Our formal training and education isn’t all that any of us bring to the table, even when that training is what provides us with a seat at that table.

PROJECT TYPES

Small Center works with partner organizations in a variety of ways, including design/build projects, design visioning projects, public programming, and teaching.

Though these project types vary widely in budget, timeline, and team size, we work to ensure our values and engagement methods apply to each, expanding the conception of engagement from an early design development task to a process integral to and integrated with the entire design process, from conception to implementation.

Design/Build

Our built work is achieved in a curricular setting led by faculty and 12-15 students. In 14-weeks, our project teams engage with a partner, their constituencies, and other stakeholders, design collaboratively, navigate permitting, and build the project.

The process is both fruitful and intense for students and our partners, as design decisions are made quickly and collaboratively.

Engagement efforts include site observation and interviews, design review sessions with a variety of stakeholders, public information sessions, surveys, and more.

Public Programming

In 2014, our center moved from an on-campus location into a stand-alone building in the Central City neighborhood. Taking advantage of a large storefront space and a generous grant from the Surdna foundation, we began to develop public programming as a key part of our approach to community engagement. With monthly panels exploring the big issues facing our small city, twice yearly exhibits that expanded on the historical roots of current challenges and the ability to host and convene gatherings of scholars, practitioners, activists, and the general public.

We approach this element of engagement as centering the value of sustained community building, and critical to the work of un-siloing efforts to build a better world.

Design Visioning

Design visioning is conducted with smaller teams consisting of a faculty design lead and paid student interns. Projects at the schematic design phase often benefit from a flexible timeframe that curricular schedules cannot accommodate. Visioning projects aim to produce design concepts, budgets, and visualizations that can then be used for fundraising.

Engagement includes our typical collaborative design process, public meetings, connecting with possible funders, and interviews and design reviews with partner boards, neighbors, and others.

Curricular

In addition to our curricular design-build projects, Small Center offers seminars in Public Interest Design, Design & Health, and Design & Society. These classes facilitate research and provide another kind of platform for engagement with partners throughout the city. They also allow more students, including non-architecture students, to engage with Small Center, our partners, and programs.

Time is limited in seminar settings, as opposed to credit-intensive design studios, and as such the most appropriate collaborations for this format are often schematic in scope. Seminar students can conduct early research and provide big picture ideas for upcoming projects. Because of this dynamic, we find it helpful to work with partners who are already familiar with the collaborative design process, and who have projects at the very beginning stages of development.

PROJECT INTAKE

The majority of Small Center's projects come through our annual Request for Proposals. Each year, Small Center receives funding for two projects through generous support from Johnson Controls, Inc., and offers an open call to community based organizations and non-profits to submit their project ideas. The Small Center team hosts an information session for groups interested in applying, and will meet in pairs with anyone who wants help developing their ideas before submitting them. This allows Small Center staff to better understand the needs of our partners and to recognize patterns across the city.

Equally important, the information session and meetings help our partners understand the services and expertise of Small Center. We often assemble interdisciplinary teams to tackle challenges that reach beyond our design expertise, and sometimes our greatest service is to convene conversations and get folks who have similar ideas or are facing similar challenges together to discuss a path forward. We also work to connect applicants with appropriate partners in the cases where our expertise does not match well with the needs of a particular project.

The proposals are limited to three pages; our goal is to understand the project and its importance to the partner organization, not to make more work for their team! We also want to make the review process manageable for our jury, which is made up of past partners, alumni and faculty of the school, foundation partners, and other civic leaders, each of whom have an understanding of the context of our work, our applicants, and the city that they bring to bear in assessing the potential impact of a given project.

Our team receives requests for collaboration in a variety of settings. Non-RFP project intake includes inquiries driven by our public programming and collaborative research. Given New Orleans' size and tight network, we also field the occasional project request at the playground, the grocery store, and the corner bar.

Public Programming

Public programming is open to all, but also aims to support community and non-profit leaders in connecting with each other and potential resources through networking and discussion around the major issues facing our city, simultaneously improving access to information for communities that have often been marginalized. Continuing to build upon long-standing relationships with community leaders through regular programming allows Small Center to not only have impact as project managers and conveners, but also as an educational and design resource.

Research

Small Center has used cumulative project requests and surveying to gauge the concerns of our fellow residents, and we draw upon our network of project partners and other collaborators to better understand the challenges facing our city. Resulting research threads include Social Histories, Public Space, Education, Affordable Housing, and Healthy Cities, and have led to collaborative work with housing advocates, environmental scientists, and educational institutions, among others.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

SAMPLE

2016 RFP Project Summary & Score Card

Community Partner: Maggie's Donut Shop – Fly Pastries
Project Type: __Visioning/Planning __Design/Build _X Unclear

Staff Notes: *Pros: Undoubtedly, Maggie has extensive experience in both management of butterfly environments and delicous yeasted AND cake donuts.*

-Cons: Does New Orleans really need another donut shop (see: Tastee Donuts, District Donuts)? Do Maggie's constituents actually need or want more access to butterflies and tasty fried pastries?

CAN
Achievable?

WANT
Exciting?

NEED
Impact?

Juror Notes:
-Pros: Undoubtedly, Maggie has extensive experience in both management of butterfly environments and delicous yeasted AND cake donuts.

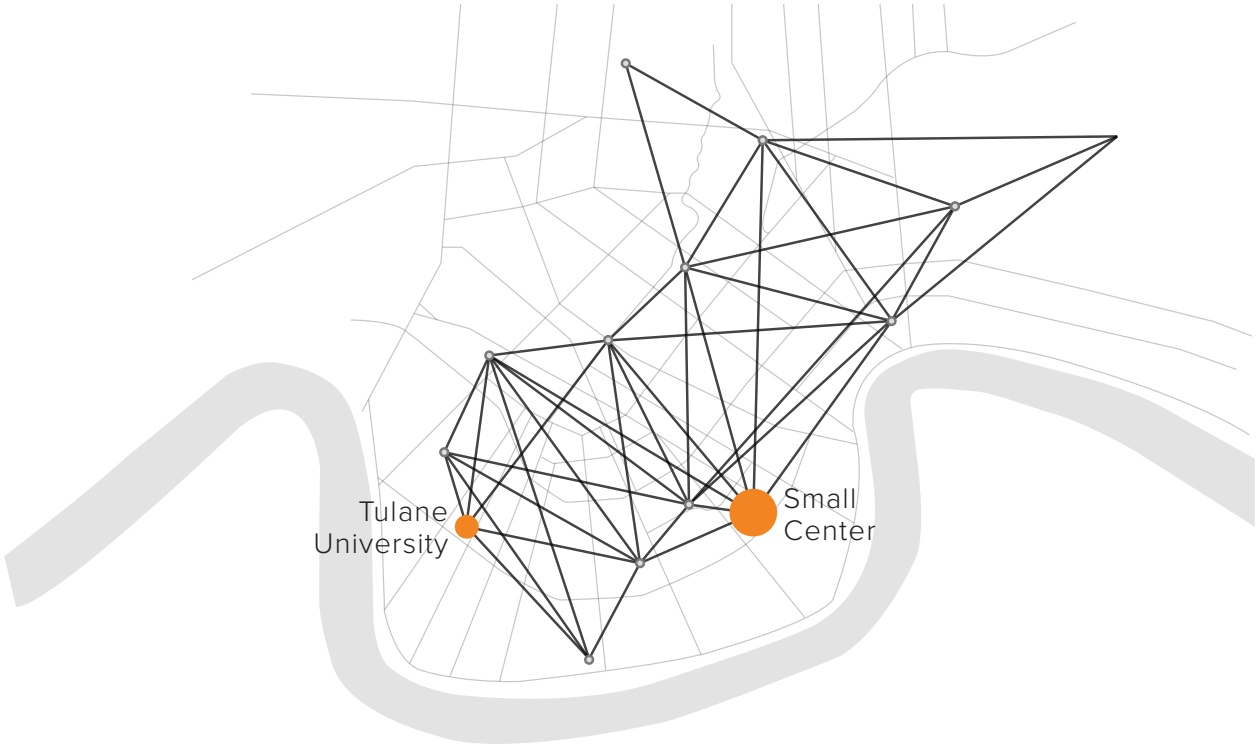
-Cons/Caveats: Does New Orleans really need another donut shop (see: Tastee Donuts, District Donuts)? Do Maggie's constituents actually need or want more access to butterflies and tasty fried pastries?

ACADEMIC SETTING

Working from within an academic institution shapes much of the work we do, from the constraints of academic semesters (and therefore project size and scope), to the types of funders available to the center. We draw upon the expertise of our Architecture faculty and staff to provide design leadership for many of our projects, and also collaborate with other departments across the university.

Small Center is located about 4 miles from Tulane's main campus, which provides a more central location relative to our project partners, and a much more accessible platform for public programming and events. Our off-campus location often serves as a retreat or meeting site for university departments and other organizations that use our space, fostering interactions in which we come to know each others' work and can discuss future collaborations.

Connecting to projects and partners throughout New Orleans



PREPARING STUDENTS

Tulane University typically draws students internationally and from all 50 states, so as we recruit students to work with us on real, client-based projects rooted in the geography, culture, and history of New Orleans, we understand that we must provide history and context to ensure an informed approach to engagement.

We use a mixed bag of ethnographic approaches, most of which are new to our students each semester. Our first task in each project, before students learn what they'll actually be working on, is to outline the toolkit we work from and open a collective discussion on how the 'engaged' in 'community-engaged design' can work. Students aren't expected to become anthropologists over the course of a semester, but they will certainly learn to employ some ethnographic tools.

Ethnography is a research method that comes out of cultural anthropology, but also gets used in sociology, marketing, business, and increasingly in design, often reframed as "design thinking." Ethnography literally means 'describing peoples,' and within design contexts you'll sometimes see it referred to as 'sited ethnography' or 'design ethnography,' which more specifically frame the scope of the research and its relationship to space.

Contextual training

By engaging with partners in neighborhoods across New Orleans, our students are often walking into a world very different than the one they come from. We begin studio each semester with a peer-led training on the New Orleans context, including a heavy emphasis on the roles and intersections of class and race in shaping the city and the lives of its residents. This helps to prepare students to be self reflexive in their work and respectful in their interactions with clients and their stakeholders.

Research & Relationships

Who has written about the issue? About the neighborhood? Ask clients for readings; often non-profit organizations have materials they give volunteers, new members, or staff. For a list of readings assigned with each of our design projects, visit our project pages at small.tulane.edu.

Ecosystem Analysis

Observation of neighborhood; interviewing neighbors and passers-by. Understanding the broader scope of neighborhood and audience, especially in the context of changing neighborhoods: Are people moving out? Is the neighborhood gentrifying? What does that mean for the project you are working on?

Public Programming

While we have already outlined the benefits of public programming in creating public conversations around critical issues, of course these benefits extend to our students as well. From students who help curate our exhibits to those who attend associated panel discussions, students who learn about issues such as redlining, affordable housing shortages, transit needs, and climate challenges are much better prepared to work on engaged design projects in New Orleans and in any setting.

ENGAGEMENT AS BUILDING

Our framework for engagement builds on the strength of our community as we collaborate to ***build consensus, build understanding, build accountability, build power,*** and ***build a bigger table***.

This framework allows for multiple approaches to engagement that sometimes layer or shift as needed over the course of a project. In a given collaboration we might start with the approach of building consensus, getting a group of stakeholders to agree on a common solution, then shift to building power, designing tools and convening the public to push for a politically viable solution, and finally settle into building accountability, designing a process for ongoing feedback.

This flexible approach means we put a lot of time and energy into developing a process for each project, and then adapting it as the project unfolds. In the next section, we'll talk through some examples of each type of 'building' from some of our projects over the past few years.

BUILD CONSENSUS

We believe that our interventions have their greatest impact when all of the project's stakeholders can bring their perspectives, needs, and desires to the table. Since we work primarily with non-profit, mission driven organizations, that can mean a lot of different perspectives and backgrounds are in play.

We work hard, often early in a project to ensure that the network of stakeholders is broad, that neighbors and board members as well as clients and end users are included in meetings and workshops before formal design gets underway, and that people have many opportunities to see their perspective shaping project outcomes.

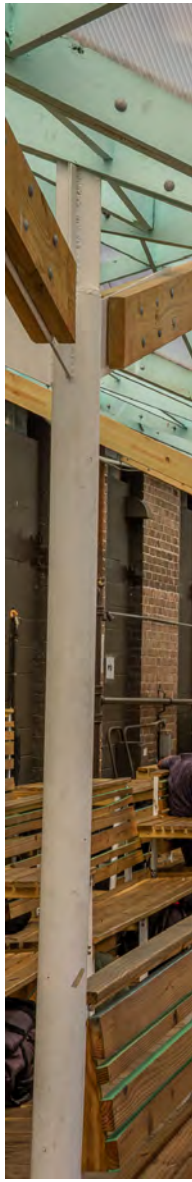


photo: Neil Alexander

OZANAM INN / Case Study

Ozanam Inn is a men's homeless shelter offering pathways to employment and independent housing as well as drop-in services like voter registration, mail boxes, and free clothing. Located in New Orleans warehouse district, it has been a community anchor for fifty years, in which time the neighborhood around it has changed radically. Shipping warehouses abandoned as mechanization shrank the port gave way to a fledgling and then thriving arts district and numerous condominiums. With that gentrification, tensions arose around Ozanam's presence, and neighbor complaints about the presence of their clients were a frequent occurrence.

Our team invited members of the local business community and neighborhood association who had tense relationships with the Inn to participate in an initial spatial inventory. The design team walked through the space (while in use) alongside Ozanam Inn Board members, staff, business owners, and neighbors. Ozanam residents, many of whom had spent decades working in the trades or in the port, had the opportunity to share their insights as dual experts: as users of the space, and as technical experts, a theme that continued throughout the project. All of the participants filled out site survey worksheets and collectively discussed the presence of high fences, lack of storage space, and limited protection from the weather as major concerns that were critical to address.

The site survey provided an opportunity for the Ozanam Inn staff and residents to present the programmatic work of the organization and the role it played in supporting those seeking to escape homelessness. By placing the neighbors in direct conversation with the staff and residents of the Inn, the exercise helped to foster a less oppositional relationship and correct the remote othering that had been a central theme of those complaints. Through collective problem identification and problem solving, Board members found new ways to engage in supporting the Inn's improvements beyond the shade structure and seating that Small Center designed and constructed.

CAMP CITY PARK / Case Study

The City Park campground study was a two week project undertaken by Small Center's summer fellows. City Park, which has expanded it's revenue-generating activities to offset a limited state budget and local fundraising, wanted to explore the creation of an urban campground near one of its decommissioned golf courses. The site would provide occasional tent camping for local schools and youth groups subsidized by rental cabins that might be used as additional "hotel rooms" during peak tourist season. Our team examined regional and statewide camping options to look at amenities and pricing, and in the process began to question some of the assumptions being made by our client about who their target audience might be.

To dig deeper into the potential for families and child-centered organizations as a robust user group, Small Center fellows conducted a series of interviews, informal game exercises, and focus groups with children at our neighboring institutions: Ashe Cultural Center's Kuumba Camp, an African Diaspora themed day camp with a highly affordable sliding scale, and summer school students at The NET Charter high school, an alternative school for those at risk of slipping through cracks in the educational system. Our potential campers hung out in tents, played ball bounce word association, and team packed for an imaginary camping trip (they were very thorough, and insightful about the habits of alligators!).

Through those exercises, it became clear that the two groups had a stark differentiation by class that had been conflated by the use of "community children" to describe both groups. Over 80% of the Kuumba kids had been camping at state parks in the region and nearly all of them were frequent users of City Park with their families. Fewer than 20% of The NET kids, on the other hand, had ever been camping at all, and none were frequent users of the park: nearly half had never visited, despite fairly robust public transportation to City Park. Our report to City Park focused on supporting first-time camping experiences through schools and youth-groups and highlighted the potential market for local family camping trips among working-class Black New Orleans residents.

BUILD UNDERSTANDING

It turns out that we don't know everything. We know, we're shocked too! Incorporating research as an ongoing aspect of the design process helps us look at design problems from non-design perspectives.

Building understanding can also include helping our partners better understand their constituencies, whether it is the demographics and desires of users of their facilities, or the priorities of potential funders.

BUILD ACCOUNTABILITY

Throughout our work, Small Center's approach is to make every effort to find new perspectives and voices in our community, to keep listening, learning, and asking questions.

Right now our questions are pretty meta: How can our small interventions add up to something big enough to meet enormous needs? What are the boundaries of presenting research and the limits of advocacy within the university? How can we value design excellence and rigorous research, and weigh the time that takes against the urgency of the moment?

On the ground, we stay in contact with our partners to assess the impact of design projects over time, whether built or unbuilt. We have worked recently to include metrics to assess factors important to each project, including goals like increased usership, awareness of the organization, and others. These exist in parallel with our curricular design and engagement learning objectives.

GNOFHAC RENTAL REGISTRY / Case Study

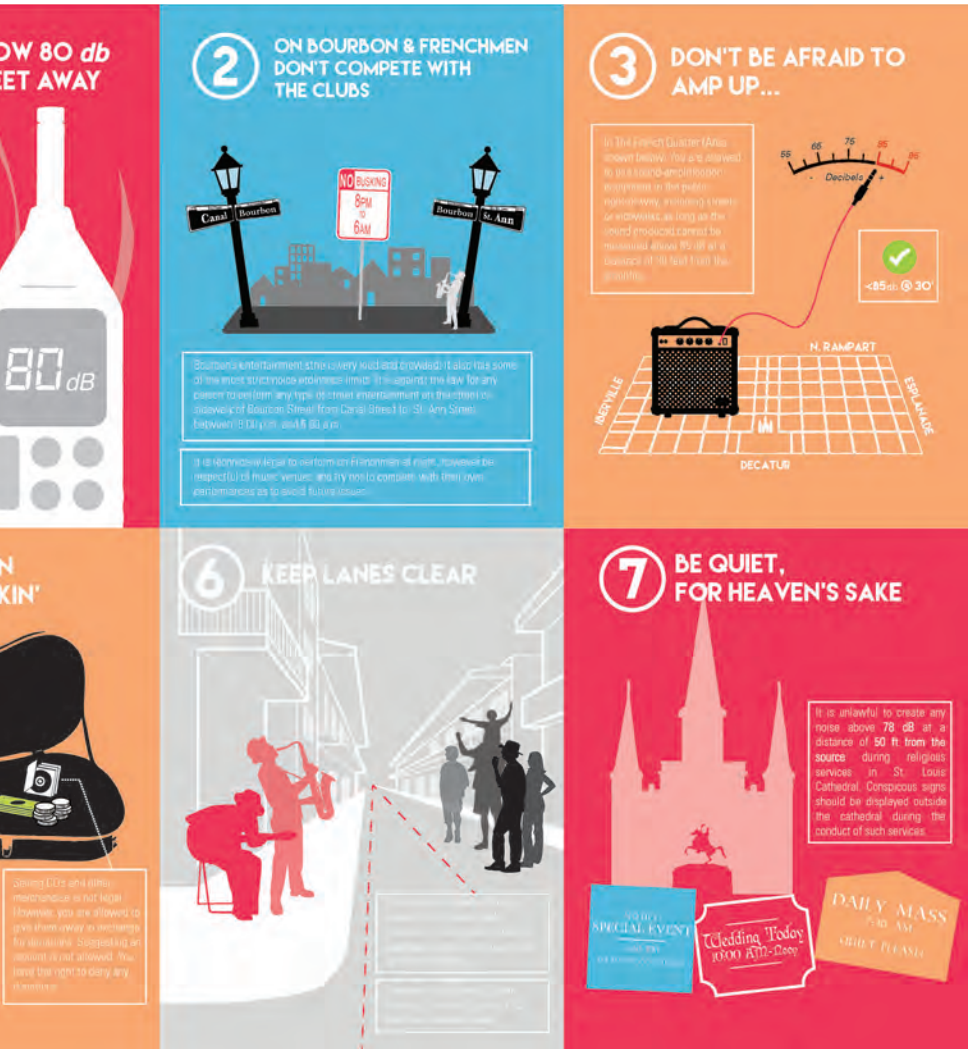
As part of our annual summer fellowship, we worked with the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center (GNOFHAC) to design and field test their advocacy materials for a rental registry, coming to a dead halt when at the third focus group one woman challenged the main image being used (see top left). It had tested exceptionally well in prior focus groups and in person-on-the-street interviews; far and away the top pick. But her objection opened the door to why that was, and brought home for our team why critical interrogation of our own assumptions and associations is always necessary.

The visual framework of the poor, sad/angry Black women as victim or as representative of a problem, was so strong and so pervasive that it was the go-to image for our respondents, and one our focus group participant was deeply tired of seeing and appropriately angry about. Her response, and her willingness to be vulnerable in sharing it, served as a humbling check on our process. Once she spoke up, everyone at the table admitted they had felt the same.

Once we were alerted to the image we needed to reconsider the language as well. We tested line after line, before our public programs manager Sue Mobley's then seven year old son intervened. Hearing the choices - we were up to 15 by then - Oran piped up to say, "but Mommy, you're not asking the real question: Who deserves to live like this?" (see bottom left). Humbled, again.

MaCCNO STREET PERFORMANCE GUIDE / Case Study

As the City of New Orleans Comprehensive Zoning Ordinance (CZO) was in the process of being updated after over forty years, the Music and Culture Coalition of New Orleans reached out to Small Center to co-create a guide for street performers and musicians. The team worked to decipher pages of city code and legalese in the creation of an easy-to-understand guide that benefits both business owners and street musicians. The guide was created to meet MaCCNO's goal of learning about how zoning affects music and culture to inform and empower cultural producers and supporters, advocating for policies that nurture New Orleans culture and cultural economy.



The MaCCNO folding pocket guide helps street musicians navigate the myriad noise ordinance and public performance rules, regulations, and enforcement bodies. The guide was widely distributed and is now even carried by various enforcement agencies in the French Quarter and Marigny entertainment districts.

BUILD POWER

Using a collaborative design process encourages building power simply by recognizing the expertise of all participants and including input from multiple constituencies.

Projects that build power are those that aim to share information widely, decoding unnecessarily complex regulatory information. They are projects that create venues for public programming, enhanced public space, and provide design services to those who often cannot access them.

BUILD A BIGGER TABLE

Building a bigger table is straightforward as a concept: include as many voices as possible in the spaces and conversations where decisions are being made. But it can be difficult to achieve and should be provided significant time and close attention throughout the project.

This work includes understanding a potential project's true constituency, and engaging those audiences in multiple formats. It is critical to anticipate the time and work associated with consensus-building to combat the tendency to dismiss broad input gathering as "slowing down" a project's implementation.

BROWN'S DAIRY REIMAGINING / Case Study

An exhibit curated by Tulane School of Architecture professor Cordula Roser Gray explored the work of small emerging design firms in New Orleans. As partner in developing the exhibit, Small Center paired the design firms with students from Youth Empowerment Project's (YEP) Design Works, a program that engages youth in design education and projects.

The design firms worked closely with YEP students to conduct a site study, observation, and engagement around Brown's Dairy, a light industrial milk distribution center in New Orleans' Central City neighborhood. With the company's relocation pending, the collaborative design teams aimed to learn what needs, uses, jobs, housing, and commercial development would best suit the surrounding neighborhood.

Students and firms exhibited their work at Small Center and presented their findings as part of a public discussion, expanding the audience for discussions often relegated to back rooms as high stakes development deals are made. The project aimed to build power through shared knowledge, and to build a bigger table by including as many voices as possible in neighborhood development discussions, preparing local residents to advocate for their own priorities with private developers and during municipal permitting.

COMMUNITY BOOK CENTER: A CLOSER LOOK

Prior case studies in this document have provided a look at specific engagement activities within selected Small Center projects. The following pages allow a deeper examination of the engagement efforts throughout a *single* curricular design/build project, conducted over the course of about 3 1/2 months.

In Spring 2016, a class of 14 students worked with the staff and clients of Community Book Center on Bayou Road in New Orleans' 7th Ward, to create a space that reflects their identity as an African-American-centered educational home, and recognizes their status as a community resource beyond their commercial function.

PROJECT & PARTNER

Community Book Center focuses on books written by and about the African diaspora and for over 33 years has had a deep commitment to providing culturally competent resources for educators, students, and families. Community Books goes beyond books and provides a valuable teaching, retail, event, and gathering space for the New Orleans community.

Like other small independent bookstores, Community Books is vulnerable to factors far beyond founder and owner Vera Warren-Williams' control. The aim of this 14-week Design/Build studio was to create a design that reflects Community Books' identity while adapting the space to be more accessible for both existing and new customers in this rapidly gentrifying neighborhood.

COMMUNITY BOOK CENTER
OPEN

INITIAL DESIGN MEETING

Our initial partner meetings provide an opportunity to get to know each other, but also to explain our engaged and collaborative design process to our partner organizations. Even amongst like-minded organizations, it is important to outline the time needed by all parties to facilitate a truly engaged and collaborative design process.

We also make room to collectively brainstorm research resources, study the neighborhood context, identify stakeholders and peer institutions, understand the structure and long-term goals of the organization, and develop a schedule that reflects intense initial engagement and sustained involvement from all sides in the design process. It is a chance to build trust, build a team, and design the upcoming process together.

In this case, Community Book Center wanted to strengthen its identity as both a commercial and community center, clarify and define multiple uses within the same space (childrens reading area, community gathering space, retail sales, etc.), and build its customer base through increased programming and visibility.

RESEARCH

Especially with projects that are constrained by a curricular schedule, our engagement and research processes begin well before the semester starts. Given Community Book Center's identity and its commercial and community gathering functions, some of our early research included the following resources:

Earning "Dual Degrees": Black Bookstores as Alternative Knowledge Spaces. Maisha T. Fischer, Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Vol. 37, no. 1 2006 pp 83-99

Walk Tall in the World: African American Literature for Today's Children. Rudine Sims Bishop, The Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 59 No. 4, Autumn 1990 pp 556-565

Contemporary African-American Children's Literature. Rudine Sims Bishop, Wasafiri Vol. 24, No. 4 December 2009 pp 3-8

Outrageous Viewpoints: Teachers' Criteria for Rejecting Works of Children's Literature. Julie E. Wollman-Bonilla, Language Arts, Vol. 75, No.4 1998 pp 287-295

STUDENT RESEARCH

Students were asked to read a number of children's books and build mock-ups of possible book displays. This allowed for an understanding of African and African-American-centric children's literature, to which many of our students had not been exposed, combined with skill-building in woodworking, joint-making, and seating design. The two merged as traditional African fabric patterns began to influence student designs and classic story characters and themes suggested possible sculptural design elements for the bookstore's interior.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

When preparing our students for engagement, the goal is to develop smart, researched questions, leaving space for unexpected answers. Interviews are designed to be fairly conversational; the idea is to first ask an open-ended question, then follow up with others as there are pauses in the conversations. If interview subjects head off on a tangent, you can redirect, but interviewers must actively listen, as sidebars may tell you more than the original answer ever could.

Steps:

1. Everyone gets a pad of post-its and a pen
2. Moderator revisits what we know. What else do we need to know? What are some of the questions that come out of reading selections, our partner's mission, and the design request?
3. Students spend 3 minutes generating as many responses as possible.
4. Responses are grouped into themes
5. Themes are refined
6. Repeat!

Students work to generate questions individually, and then collectively to group them by theme and rewrite for accuracy and tone. Prompts from the Community Books process included:

· *What are the key themes and understandings we need to carry with us into our work?*

· *What do we need to know from our client about what motivates their work, about the issue areas they work within? Is there a larger mission? Does everyone share it?*

· *What about their organization and staff, what would we need to know about day to day operations and the reasons behind them?*

· *Who do they serve or work with? How does that happen, and how does the organization define that relationship?*

· *Where does this organizations work fit into the big picture of their neighborhood or city context?*

The interview question brainstorm for the Community Book Center project prompted a theme of “children.”

- What is the ideal learning space for children?
- How do you want children to use the space?
- What else, besides books, makes this a kids’ space?
- Do your regular children readers hold an interest in writing as well?
- Could children help lead workshops?
- Do you solely focus on reading or writing as well?
- What learning styles and teaching tools do you typically encounter? Have they changed? If so, how?
- What kinds of new topics do you want to introduce to children? How?
- What age groups are we targeting?
- How and when are kids using the space?
- Should rebranding be more kid-friendly?
- What are good examples of kid spaces?
- What makes a space inviting and comfortable for a child?
- What age range are the children, primarily?
- How do children currently use the space?
- What is the current level of participation among children?
- How do children want to learn?
- What would you like the function of the space to be for children
- How can we reach more kids and their parents money?
- What is the currently level of communication with surrounding schools?
- What times of the day/week will children use the space?
- How do you want the space to effect children’s education?

These were then categorized and ultimately reduced to:

- How do children use the space now?
- How would you like them to use it?
- What ages do you want to focus on?
- How are you reaching parents/schools?

This process helps to correct for a tendency to jump too quickly into spatial concerns and can highlight assumptions that need to be addressed, or reoriented as explicit questions. Further discussion allows the student team to distinguish between questions best interviewed in the initial engagement activity, and those that might be better answered through observation or surveying.

are we framing the problem correctly?
Holistic
How loud does it seem to you?!
Framing within tangible facts
Science of Sound
- space btwn decibels
- points of comparison
- LOW FREQUENCIES
Space
- Right of way
- CZO
Complaints

I Love My City

PARTNER INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

One question raised by our students, “What makes a space ‘kid-friendly?’” elevated a set of assumptions related to kid-only, as opposed to multi-generational spaces. Those assumptions came into sharp relief as our partners Vera and Jennifer explained the importance of multi-generational gathering, knowledge sharing, community mothering, and oral history traditions to the African-American community, and more broadly to New Orleans culture.

Thus, the design implications expanded: how does a space serve three generations comfortably, how can we create places to gather and share knowledge? And they contracted: no single-person reading booths, no isolated children’s space.

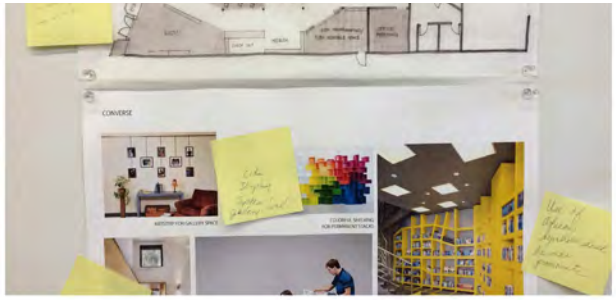
SKILL-BUILDING

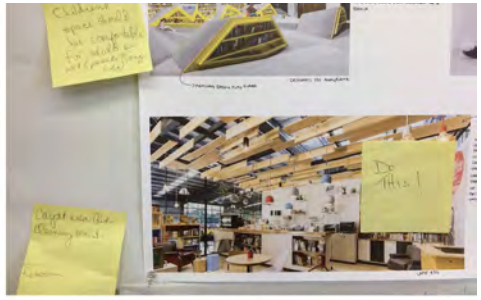
Our curricular projects certainly focus on engaged design, but must also provide skill-building for our students, in welding, woodworking, and other areas. Students conceive and construct both abstract figures and project-specific mock-ups to become familiar with a variety of material types and construction techniques. These skills are critical so that students can avoid any limitations, utilizing the full range of options when responding to the design needs identified throughout the engagement process.

NEIGHBORHOOD ANALYSIS & ITERATIVE DESIGN

Students researched the history of Community Book's location on Bayou Road, the significance of the neighborhood's concentration of minority-owned businesses, and the typical analysis of the physical and social characteristics of the site's context, from measuring the wide sidewalks and cobblestone streets to counting the number of pedestrians and engaging with them as they pass by.

Iterative design simply refers to the process of designing with continual participation and feedback from our partners and their constituents. This requires a lot of coordination, but even casual presentations with hand sketches can convey design ideas and help build consensus before final details and more sophisticated drawings are attempted.

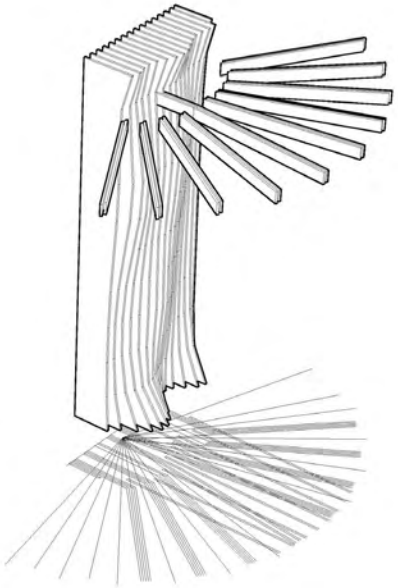


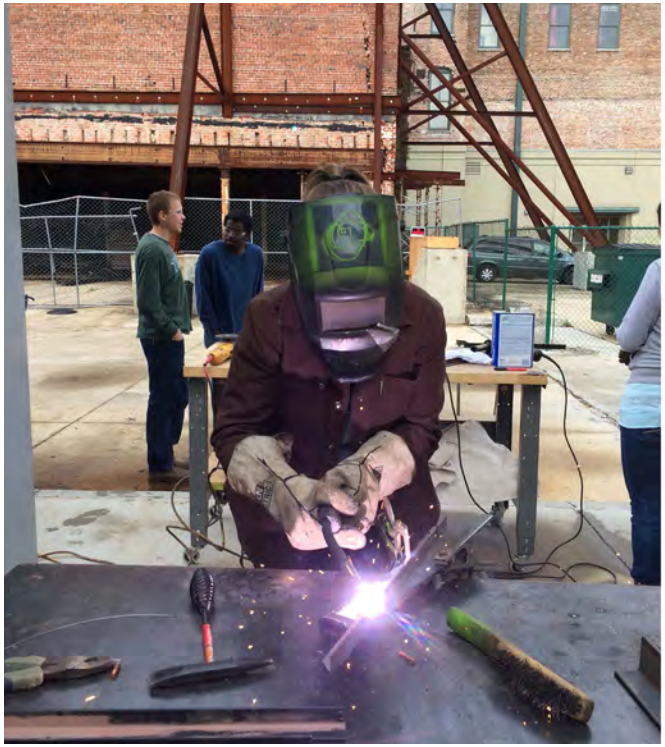


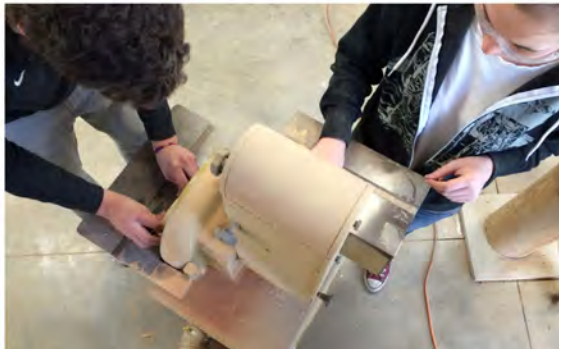
PROTOTYPING, DESIGN DEVELOPMENT, & ADAPTATION

Prototyping is important to test design ideas, material choices, and construction techniques. It also allows various project elements to be tested in the actual space where they will be used. In the case of Community Books, students field-tested a number of seating options and shelving units, providing an opportunity to critique their layout and functionality.

Lessons learned included early issues with mobility (i.e. it is easy to put everything on wheels to maximize flexibility, but you may sacrifice stability and long-term performance), and an emphasis on simple furniture shapes that could be used in different ways for Community Books' various events and audiences.



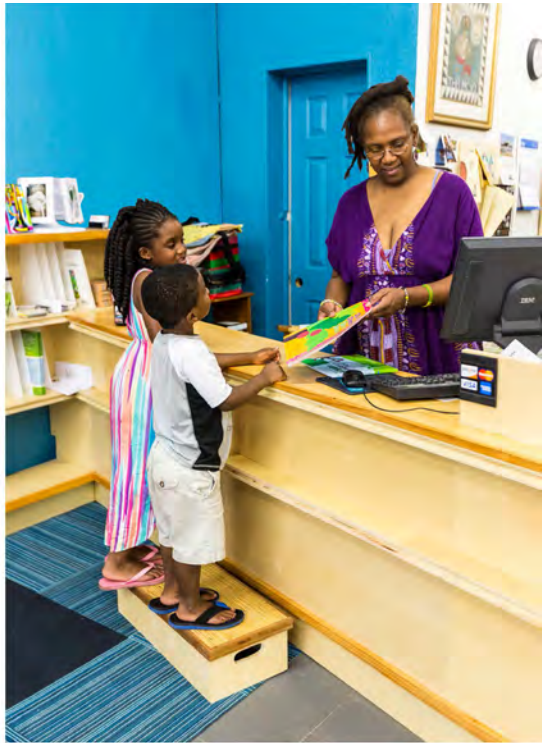




FABRICATION & INSTALLATION

Having settled on an overall design scheme, students worked to fabricate various elements of the project. In the case of Community Books, this included shelving, seating, sculptural and figurative installations, storage, and more.

Engagement during the fabrication phase is typically less intense, but it is important to continue testing, and even to be open to small changes as the realities of installing the project raises new questions for both the design team and the project's end users.



CONCLUSION

We hope this document has provided both general and project-specific information to make clear our approach to engaged design. The remaining pages outline some observation and engagement exercises that we keep in our toolkit and adapt to each project as we get to know our partners and come to understand the specific context of each design challenge.

For more information on more than 120 projects completed over the past 15 years, please visit small.tulane.edu.

OBSERVATION & ENGAGEMENT EXERCISES

Interview

For each project, our students' first contact with the client is in the format of a formal interview with the organization's leader or leadership team. Clients present an overview of their organization's history and current work, and reiterate the project proposal. Students ask questions developed in the brainstorming process, recognizing our clients as the experts.

Interviews are the central means by which we can learn from our clients (and sometimes their constituents and target audiences) in their own words. Through active listening, asking thoughtful open-ended questions and follow ups, and careful observation of non-verbal cues, we can gain valuable insights and build trust that we're going to lean on through what is a pretty intense process over the course of a semester.

Steps

1. Interviews are more effective in a space that the person being interviewed is usually in and, when possible, places relevant to the design challenge.
2. No more than 2 team members should interview an individual, with assigned roles as interviewer and note taker.
3. Start off by asking broad questions, and encouraging a conversational style before asking questions that directly relate to the design challenge
4. Make sure you're getting exact quotes, recording and transcribing if possible.
5. Observe and take notes on body language and surroundings

Casual Observation

Particularly within a spatial design field, it is often useful to challenge our own assumptions about how we observe the world around us:

How many of you think you're a pretty good observer? (raise hands)

Prompts:
Describe the space we're in.
Describe the person sitting next to you.

We're all excellent observers, and our brains are taking in a ton of data all the time, but we're bad processors, in part because it's inefficient to retain all of that detailed information. We pay attention to what matters. So if we want to really *see*, we have to slow down and be very intentional about the process of observing.

Let's try again.
What does this space signal? What are the cues you see?

Observation can also help you to identify the range of users, behaviors, and activities in and around a site, but in order to understand the meanings behind that data, you'll have to turn to slightly more direct approaches.

Curated Reviews

Community-engaged design works best with interdisciplinary teams and recognizes many types of expertise. Most of our clients are community-based or non-profit organizations who are deeply invested in their work, which can also mean that they don't have the time and space to reach out to peers, cultivate new funders, or build strong relationships with parallel organizations (groups that serve the same neighborhood, client base, etc.). So where both design and capacity building are a part of what we do, a curated review can be a great tool to bring a broad range of perspectives to the table, tap specific expertise, or reach a new audience.

Some of the questions we ask of the client (and research ourselves) are:

1. Are there related organizations who might have insights into this project or design problem?
2. Are there parallel individuals or groups working on our organization's bigger goals?
3. Are there key funders or potential donors whose buy-in we need?

Participant Observation

There's often a big difference between how people say they use a space and what actually happens there. Spending time observing, while working as a volunteer on a minor task, can provide deeper insights into how, when, and by whom space is used than simply observing, because it allows opportunities to ask questions, or have things explained conversationally in a more natural context than a formal interview.

Steps:

1. Identify the site(s) to be observed.
2. Schedule an appropriate time to visit a site, ideally several different days and times of day over a brief window of time.
3. Arrange for an appropriate activity, filing or stuffing envelopes in an office or weeding in a community garden or vacant lot.
4. Observe and record who uses the space: What are they doing? Who are they interacting with? How do people move around one another, and in coordination with each other, to make the space work for them? Are there aspects that simply don't work? Why not?

Focus Group

Group interviews are a great tool for identifying shared or conflicting design preferences, issues, and values that are central to a project, as well as gaining insights into the diversity of experiences and preferences within groups. Pushing beyond the leadership of an organization to interview other stakeholders can be a good use of focus groups, which are efficient, especially in the early stages of a project.

We need to hear from all of those who will use or be in and around the space we're designing, in order to design to their actual needs. Push beyond the leadership of an organization to interview primary stakeholders. Staff, regular clients or constituents, more infrequent end users, and potential end users have more agency to voice their perspectives and preferences in a structure that is collective, and the power dynamics underlying that concern is also one of the reasons it is so critical to build trust early in our interactions with the client.

Steps:

1. Identify and invite appropriate group
2. Frame the exercise in light of the design question
3. Design team members ask open ended questions
4. One design team member takes on the role of facilitator, guiding the conversation and encouraging group members to respond to each other as well as to the questions asked
5. At least one other design team member should serve an assigned note taker so the facilitator can closely follow the flow of conversation rather than just running through a list of questions
6. Identify any participants who would be good subjects for individual interviews or reviews

For all interviewees one of the most important questions to ask is, "Who else do you think we should talk to?"

Survey

Surveys are commonplace tools to gather information and can be deployed digitally, by mail, door-to-door, or by tabling at community meetings. The key to good data is to develop questions in partnership with your client to achieve comparable and targeted answers. However, as with other techniques, active listening and *some* open ended questions paired with more targeted survey questions will allow the conversation to open up, often yielding stories that can help you understand the neighborhood context and even inform your design.

Because surveying can be time intensive, it can also be an opportunity for a project client to add questions to better understand their constituency, particularly if they have not recently deployed surveys.

Especially with door-to-door surveys, it is important for our students to understand that they may be perceived as representing a university, our client, and/or generally an “outsider” perspective. We often partner with and compensate local youth groups and other organizations who live and work in a project’s neighborhood to partner with our students and help them better understand and execute the task of surveying.

Dancing in the Wings
DEBBIE ALLEN
pictures by KADRA NELSON

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The content and direction of Small Center's engagement practices are based on nearly 15 years of successes, failures, and lessons learned while conducting collaborative design projects across the City of New Orleans. The introduction of public programming and a renewed engagement strategy, comprising much of the content of this publication, was largely shaped and directed by our former Public Programs Manager Sue Mobley, who now serves as Director of Advocacy for the local design justice organization Colloqate Design.

We also recognize the invaluable contributions of the faculty and students of the Tulane School of Architecture. Individual faculty project leaders and student participants are credited at small.tulane.edu.

Projects outlined in this publication were conducted in collaboration with partner organizations, their leadership and staffs, constituents, volunteers, and more. The names below represent just some of our key collaborators:

Ozanam Inn
Deacon Baggio S. DiGiovanni, Reneé Blanche, Clarence Adams, Staff, Program Volunteers, and Clientele

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Cordula Roser Gray, Marcella Del Signore, Collectivo, One to One, Aron Chang

Community Book Center
Vera Warren-Williams, Mama Jennifer Turner

THE ALBERT AND TINA

SMALL CENTER

FOR COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

TULANE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE