2016

Boomerang Studio: Community Design for Action

Jessica Walton

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Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the IDES faculty and staff, especially my advisors, Christiana Lafazani, Roberto Ventura, Emily Smith, Rob Smith + Hillary Fayle. Your support and feedback has been integral in developing my skills and interests as a designer. A special thanks to Carla Mae Crookendale for the research assistance.

So much appreciation and admiration for my classmates. Your individual styles have made for an interesting, thoughtful and often a laughter filled experience.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends. I am lucky to continually be loved and supported by such great people.
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Design should excite, motivate, develop, engage and inspire.

Design is layered. It has no end. It teaches every aspect of life and in this way, design changes our concept of time. Design increases productivity or asks to savor the moment.

Design is a call to action. To beautify, to contemplate, to educate. To imagine the past or create for the future.

To craft an experience using hand, body and mind. To engage the senses. Design constantly assesses known while looking off the past. Ultimately, design benefits the user. A designer must show an understanding of the user’s connection to their space within the design.

A designer’s character is reflected in their design. Therefore, one must pursue design with honest intention.

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Design has the ability to spark discussion. To engage others in questions of how. To create an environment that calms, supports, or energizes.

Design has the ability to give a voice to those who are underrepresented. In this way, design empowers.

“My goal is to make furniture that people can be comfortable living with. If you’re not preoccupied with making an impact with your designs, chances are something that looks good today will look good tomorrow.”

Sam Maloof

manifesto
research
abstract

Introduction
A study published by the Southern Education Foundation in January 2015 found 31 percent of Virginia’s public school students in 2013 came from low income families. A report from The Working Poor Families Project states that, of the 23 million children from low income families across the country, over half are racial or ethnic minorities. Additionally, research conducted by the Americans for the Arts found that these underserved communities are provided less access to arts education. In 2016, the percentage of African American and Hispanic students who had received arts education was lower than white students. Comparatively, while students received arts instruction at more than double the rate, 67.1 percent.

Methods
Numerous case studies and literature reviews make an argument supporting the belief that students benefit in many ways from arts education and design thinking. Reviewing statistics on the availability of arts programs in public schools further proves the importance of these programs. Interviews and peer reviewed writings address the importance of diversity within design and the means of achieving greater representation for marginalized designers.

Results
“African-Americans are approximately 13.5% of the nation’s population…The number of black registered architects who are members of the American Institute of Architects currently is barely 1%.” (Travis, 2010).

Architects, designers and educators such as Jack Travis explain that within design there is a lack of representation which creates tension between white peers who struggle to engage in conversations of inclusion. There are very few initiatives within the design community to engage in this topic or encourage different voices to join the profession. The implementation of design education and thinking gives students critical skills for navigating complex problems, managing stress and anxiety as well as developing interpersonal skills. These skills are critical to navigating the adult world. Programs that aim to teach design thinking to low income communities of color might provide students skills that will benefit them in their adult lives.

Motivation
A study published by the Southern Education Foundation in January 2015 found 39 percent of Virginia public school students in 2013 came from low income families. A report from The Working Poor Families Project states that, of the 23 million children from low income families across the country, over half are racial or ethnic minorities. Additionally, research conducted by the Americans for the Arts found that these underserved communities are provided less access to arts education. In 2016, the percentage of African American and Hispanic students who had received arts education was lower than white students. Comparatively, while students received arts instruction at more than double the rate, 67.1 percent.

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Decline of Arts Education in Underserved Populations

Diversity of Interior Design Professionals in Comparison to U.S. Population

Arts Engagement in Relation to College Graduation Rate Among Low-Income Students

Diversity of Interior Design Professionals in Comparison to U.S. Population
Studio H

Studio H is a public school studio class modeled after a design-build style of design discovery. The program creates real world projects for middle + high school students in communities that lack interactive, design thinking based curricula. Through the Studio H class, students have the design process of projects they’ve imagined and followed through to creation.

Program founder, Emily Pirollton breaks down the curriculum into six design directives:

- **Design through action**
- **Design with, not for**
- **Design systems, not stuff**
- **Document, share, measure**
- **Start locally + scale globally**
- **Build**

And approaches the integration of education and design as a means of fostering community by addressing the overlap in these main ways:

**Design for Education.** Addressing the spaces, materials and experience within an occupied area.

**Redesigning Education.** Looking at how education is administered, what is offered and to whom. In other words, providing opportunity for change and the motivation for those involved to want change.

**Design as Education.** Teaching and learning “design thinking, coupled with real construction and fabrication skills put towards a local community purpose.” As well as, enabling the critical studio environment with a shop based class to apply core skills.

How does Studio H address the program for spark?

Studio H addresses many of themes within spark’s program. It focuses on the same demographic: middle + high school aged students, with particular attention to girls and students of color, showing them the ways they can use their core subjects to generate an interest in the planning of spaces and how things are made, while emphasizing the local community for which the students are designing.

Studio H pushes students to think critically + encourages self-expression through these community based projects. The Studio H curriculum celebrates independent critical thinking, experimentation and helps to foster confidence through a sense of accomplishment + new understanding.

Students learn critical thinking, collaboration and verbal communication skills which are vital in the working world. Studio H’s year-long curriculum teaches students the order of hard work, hands-on learning and craftsmanship.
Studio Gang Architects
Completed 2014
Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, Michigan

This building was designed with diversity in mind. It is meant to engage the community in conversations about social justice. It does so by creating an interior space that is open and communal. At the center of the building a sunken area with a fireplace creates an inviting place for conversation. Furthermore, it creates a direct connection between the dialogue happening within the building to the communities outside the building. Each arm of the building overlooks landscape particular to the college community. City, grove and campus are visually connected to the heart of the building through these sight lines and place all 3 as equally important.
MVRDV’s design for the new office building of a broadcasting company sought to create an interconnected space that changed elevation through a variety of means beyond the standard staircase. The designers employed ramps, stepped floors, and grand staircases—also used as alternative seating areas—to connect the 4 floors of the building.

Additionally, the building’s design brings the exterior lines into the space, extending the curves of the facade through to the interior of the office, making a strong connection to the outside. This technique also capitalizes on the desire to create a flow throughout the building from level to level. The use of concrete to call out the strong geometric characteristics of the space creates a continuity of form from exterior to interior.
Randolph is an historically black middle class neighborhood. The area is named after Virginia E. Randolph, an African-American woman who was a prominent educator in the Richmond area during the 19th century. The neighborhood is flanked by The Fan, Oregon Hill and Maymont. The close vicinity of VCU creates an opportunity for engagement between VCUarts students and the Randolph community.

In the early 1970’s, a group of neighborhood activists worked closely with the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA) to rebuild the neighborhood. Much of the area was razed and redeveloped, which caused many older residents to leave the neighborhood.

In response to concerns of gentrification, the redevelopment originally called for a large amount of low income housing. However, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) thought a high volume of low income housing in one area would create a concentration of people with minimal resources and the plan had to be reworked.

1981 saw the creation of new public housing and Section 8 subsidized rentals for low income residents. However, interest had been building for the development of private homes. This caused RRHA and HUD to reassess their plan.

The new development plan was tagged as, “build a neighborhood, not a project”. It’s aim was to create a mixed income neighborhood. Initially, the original community disapproved of the plan. Following numerous community meetings, residents agreed to the new development plan.

The community was designed by UDA Architects. They focused on continuing to foster the current community. The development called for three parks, which created interior spaces and drew home buyers who were concerned about a lack of green space in urban environments.

Currently, some of these businesses still lie in Randolph. However, the area has changed. Many homes have been purchased by investors and subsequently rented to VCU students. The changes in the area have taken away from the community that residents fought hard to develop.
site study
sun study
parti diagrams
initial programming
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<th>Meeting Space</th>
<th>Kitchen</th>
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<td>Area where designers are stationed</td>
<td>Space for large groups to gather</td>
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<td>Kitchenette with small dining space</td>
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design process

- conceptual
- schematic
- design development
Conceptual design began with the 30x30x30 project. Creating a series of 2D images and 3D models drawing on important concepts within the research led to discoveries about the orientation of interior space. Work was largely inspired by a series of drivers related to the aspirations of the project.

“For a songwriter, you don’t really go to songwriting school; you learn by listening to tunes. And you try to understand them and take them apart and see what they’re made of, and wonder if you can make one, too.”

— Tom Waits
Taking important discoveries from the 30x30x30 exercise and diving deeper into the conceptual exploration of certain drivers led to a series of 2D and 3D pieces. The example below looks at the wealth and ownership. In researching the lack of diversity in design and the societal influences for this, an understanding of wealth and income inequality played an important role.
Conceptual studies of spaces within the building. Looking at types of spaces, light and function.
Metaphorically, the give and take between educator and student can be seen as a tree, old and experienced, giving itself to a fire in order to provide nourishment for the greater good. As the tree burns, it becomes ash which provides important minerals necessary for the growth of the younger tree.

Give is greater and inspires taker to give to a new taker
Taker becomes giver

Concept

Education is a constant give and take. Educators give themselves to educate the young because they value a community of informed citizens and realize the importance of each child receiving an education as it has been an important path for their own opportunity.

Despite this selflessness, students don’t always reciprocate. They lack life experience or have been taught to value alternatives to education. Educators know that the return for investing in their students now is a future with more engaged, thoughtful adults.
The schematic design process started with general diagrams of the anticipated areas within the building and developed into solidified plans, sections and elevations. Over the course of the schematic phase, original programming changed as new ideas were generated. The wood and metal shops became a single shop space. A second level was added with pin up and critique space. Additionally, the gallery space was redesigned to be an open area and was moved to the middle of the building.

schematic
Honing in on spatial layout, bringing concept into FF+E and developing a variety of drawings to express the nature of the space were the main focuses of the design development phase. Much of the time spent was going over previous iterations of drawings to tighten the link between concept and physical space.

- Sketchbook drawing of potential wall detail
- Site analysis to help address potential interior materiality
- FF+E Inspiration
presentation content
Axon cut through window of ribbon

Axon cut through bench of ribbon

Magnetic glassboard

Bench with 5" birch plywood ribbon

Window

Level 2 Seating + Stair Section

Critique Area + Community Stair

Studio Ribbon Wall Elevation
Reception,

A bright area welcoming families, students and other guests. Furnishings within reception and throughout the building aim to showcase classic and modern pieces within the design world to be used as precedents for students learning in the space.

Polygon Wire table | Herman Miller | Studio 7.5

Linum chair | Alberto Vitello

Optical Light pendant | Lee Broom

Tropicalia lounge chair | Patricia Urquiola

Eames Wire Base Low table | Herman Miller | Charles + Ray Eames
Ribbon Wall
A continuous ribbon of birch plywood frames the studio entrances, then runs through the space using rectilinear lines and turning corners to become various surfaces with which users can engage.

MATERIALS
- Clarus Glassboards
  Magnetic, Pop teal
- Plexwood
  Birch, oil/wax finish
- Birch plywood
Studio

Open area with large work surfaces. Brightly lit by large storefront windows. Looking out onto W. Main St., the activity within the studios creates a dialogue with pedestrians, drawing them into explore the space.

Mayline Ranger Drafting table | Steelcase
Qivi chair | Steelcase
Shortcut stool | Steelcase
Nelson X-leg table | Herman Miller | George Nelson
The open gallery creates a series of moments throughout the circulation space. Showcasing student work in multiple areas of the space aims to foster community and confidence in the students. A multi-use staircase provides opportunity for students to connect with their peers through conversation.

FF&E

Stool 60 I Alvar Aalto
Critique Area

The second level provides pin up and critique space for students, as well as a variety of areas to engage with each other on projects. The ribbon runs through this space creating opportunities for student engagement through rectilinear geometries.

FF&E

High Stool 64 | Alvar Aalto

MATERIALS

Plexwood
Okoume, oil/wax finish
show
install
Design Thinking: Providing Opportunity for Underserved Communities within the Design Discipline

How can we as designers support efforts to increase diversity within our communities?

A collaboration between the Denver Center for Arts and Commerce and Undergraduate Architecture and Master of Urban Design and Planning students to explore how designing for and with underserved communities can aid in increasing diversity within the design profession. This study will evaluate data from a survey created by the Designer Autism and Neurodiversity Group in which participants were asked to reflect on the identity and purpose of their projects and personal growth. This information will be used to identify common themes and a preliminary framework to aid in understanding the social and environmental context of designing for underserved communities. The preliminary framework will then be evaluated by a group of design professionals and designers, followed by a feedback session with members of the Designer Autism and Neurodiversity Group. This feedback will be used to refine the framework and inform the development of a new design thinking framework.

References:

How can we as designers support efforts to increase diversity within our communities?

A study published in the Southern Illinois Journal of Law and Social Science in 2015 found 15 percent of Virginia's public school students fall into low-income families. In 2013 came tenaciously backwards. A study that ran in The Working Poor Families Project states that, of the 42 million children in families and similar economic circumstances like our family are on food aid, food stables, and the like. Additionally, research compiled by the VCU School of the Arts in 2015 found that 77 percent of students benefit from a diversity of experiences, and it is thus beneficially promoting design education to further the diversity. Three additional findings that support the success of low-income students is that it has been proven that students who have the opportunity to participate in a design program are more likely to complete their degree and succeed in the workplace.

Educational programs effective for low-income students varied strategies that support the success of low-income students. The study showed that all students benefit from a diverse learning environment, and it is thus beneficially promoting design education to further the diversity. Three additional findings that support the success of low-income students is that it has been proven that students who have the opportunity to participate in a design program are more likely to complete their degree and succeed in the workplace.

Student data

VCU Full-time Instructional Faculty

2015-2016 Demographics (Public Institution)

Students

Blacks, Hispanics, and whites made up the U.S. population in 2010. The total number of students at VCU School of the Arts in 2015 was 2,281, with 58.5% being white, 28.7% being black, and 12.8% being Hispanic/Latino. Additionally, 4.7% of the students were from low-income families. The design program at VCU School of the Arts was ranked #3 by Design Intelligence for the 2015-2016 academic year.

Red and yellow marks the range of student enrollment, while blue indicates the total number of students at VCU School of the Arts. The VCU School of the Arts was ranked #1 public arts institution in America by U.S. News & World Report for 2015.

Design Thinking

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Project H and the City

Project H approaches the integration of education and design as a means of fostering community development. Design for Education encourages self-expression through these community based projects.

Community of Designers

Designers are often called upon to support communities and create social change through their work. Designers can be influential in shaping the environment and positively impacting society. However, designers must also be mindful of the potential for their work to reinforce existing social structures and perpetuate inequality.

Representation within the Discipline

U.S. and Mexico share similar demographic characteristics, including a young and diverse population. However, the percentage of Hispanic/Latino interior designers is not reflective of the overall Hispanic/Latino population. The Hispanic/Latino community is the second largest ethnic group in the United States, yet Hispanic/Latino interior designers make up only 3% of the profession. This gap is even more pronounced in the field of architecture, where Hispanic/Latino architects make up only 1% of the profession.

Inclusion of diverse perspectives is essential in the design process. Designers must be aware of the potential for their work to perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce existing social structures. Designers must also consider the potential for their work to benefit marginalized communities.

Works Cited

8. Fall 2015 Enrollments, VCU School of the Arts. Census Period: Current/Final as of 12/10/2015. Raw data. Center for Institutional Effectivness, Richmond, VA.