Service Learning Opportunities for Architecture Students

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The University of Hartford, along with other institutions throughout the United States, has been encouraging college students to take an active role in their communities. University initiatives in “service learning” projects provide tremendous opportunities for the college student, the community and the University.

WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

Definitions of “service learning” vary greatly. At the core of any definition of service learning, however, are two essential components. First, students must be actively engaged in learning and secondly, students must provide a service to the community. Service learning combines academics, skills, citizenship and values. For many who participate, it provides experiences which help solidify the connections between the classroom and the “real world”. It is usually hands-on in application and often collaborative in approach.

University of Hartford architecture students are usually eager to serve. Architecture students see it as an opportunity to:

• put into practice what they are learning.
• “give back” to the community.
• network with other students and professionals.
• prepare themselves for living in and supporting their communities.

Most students like the idea of community service, but not if it's required. For the University of Hartford architecture students service learning is strictly voluntary. The concept of service learning, however, is making national news through mandates. In 1997, Time Magazine reported, “Mandatory volunteerism, once the province of chichi private academies with a runaway sense of noblesse oblige, has become the latest reform found in public schools.” Maryland now has a statewide requirement. On the subject of “involuntary volunteers” where public schools are starting to require students to serve their communities, the question is, “Is that too much to ask?”
ARCHITECTURE AND SERVICE
The architecture profession has recognized the benefits of community service for years. Since 1966, The American Institute of Architects (AIA) has been focused on developing methods and materials to raise the public consciousness of design and architecture. The primary objective has not altered: “To create an awareness of and concern for the human-designed environment as it relates to the total environment among all education sectors, pre-kindergarten through adult education.” The AIA has been instrumental in providing the general public -- especially school-age children who will become decision makers as adults - with a better understanding of the factors that influence the nature of its physical surroundings.

The Architecture Resource Center (ARC) of Connecticut was created in 1991 as the education division of the Connecticut Architecture Foundation, Inc. The ARC uses architecture and urban design principles to interest students in learning, while instilling a sense of pride, self-empowerment and social responsibility. A design arts learning program, the ARC provides creative learning experiences, which are participatory, interdisciplinary, and collaborative in approach. The ARC has received local, national and international recognition and awards.

As Director of Education for the ARC, one of my responsibilities is to serve as a liaison to the University of Hartford architecture students. Students at the University have tremendous opportunities for service learning - helping to build the community. Opportunities include University wide initiatives, community events and weekly design education lessons with a local elementary school.

EDUCATIONAL MAIN STREET - UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD
Unfortunately, the Hartford Public School system is short on resources. The Sheff vs. O’Neill desegregation trial received national attention as one of the nations richest states stood accused of allowing its capital city to run an impoverished, struggling, and racially isolated public school system.

Educational Main Street is an educational partnership in Hartford’s north end which links Annie Fisher Elementary School, Lewis Fox Middle School, Weaver High School, and the University of Hartford. It was created with the intention of strengthening the educational experiences and aspirations of Hartford youth.

Educational Main Street seeks to form the “main street” that links the community together. By creating Educational Main Street, the University of Hartford reaffirmed its commitment to serving the surrounding urban school system and becoming a forceful and supportive player in attempts to improve and reform educational opportunities and resources available for Hartford’s children. Additionally, the University of Hartford is one of the founding members of the CT Campus Compact Program: The Project for Public Community Service consisting of a coalition of college and university presidents.
Educational Main Street’s activities and programs are designed to:

- cut across traditional boundaries -- between black and white, between elementary and secondary teachers and university faculty, and between public schools and private higher education.
- keep youngsters in school by engaging them in an educational continuum that stretches from birth to graduate school.
- provide students and educators with learning and teaching opportunities at partner schools, including the university campus.
- provide collaboration and faculty development opportunities for teachers at all levels and empowers teachers to create change and implement school reform.

Educational Main Street representatives visit university classrooms each semester to recruit students. Current participants are able to share their tutoring experiences with prospective tutors. Educational Main Street’s tutor program trains and places college students in one of the partner schools. Each year close to two hundred undergraduate students university wide volunteer as tutors. The tutors experience the Hartford community, are able to reinforce their own knowledge base, and are gaining valuable social skills. Because of their ability to offer added attention, tutors often are able to intervene and to help alleviate patterns of failure and frustration.

Additionally, the University’s goal of increasing its involvement in the Hartford community is met.

Each year, a number of architecture students are involved in meaningful and rewarding Educational Main Street experiences. Architecture students volunteer as tutors in math, science and technology for a variety of reasons. Many want to “give back” to the community. This past year, two Jamaican architecture students volunteered in the drafting class at Weaver High School. In October, they came to me to initiate a collaborative effort between the University’s architecture program and the Weaver High School program. My students are inspired, feel obliged to give back, and are also thankful for the opportunities they have been offered. One of these students, Sasha Walters noted, “Educational Main Street is a tutoring program where University students are able to interact with high school students in their environment and be an example of where and what they can become in life. At first I was terrified to have entered into the classroom. I was astonished that in this day and time with the progress of women in the professions, that the Computer Aided Drafting class consisted of only one girl. It was later that I learned that this girl was under the impression that women were not allowed. The fulfillment I have gotten from helping one girl to open a path way to learning more about design and architecture is a feeling that allows me to endure in my struggle to become one of the best architects that this world will ever see.”

COMMUNITY EVENTS

A. Upper Albany Neighborhood DESIGN WORKSHOP
   October 1994
“Design - A - Community Center” was presented for students at Fox Middle School in Hartford in cooperation with the Yale University Design Workshop - Center for Urban Design Research of the School of Architecture and the Architecture Resource Center (ARC). City of Hartford middle school children worked with graduate and undergraduate students of architecture to design a site specific Community Center for their neighborhood.

The Upper Albany neighborhood is composed of mixed African-American, Caribbean/West Indian and Puerto Rican-Latino/a residents. The neighborhood contains mixed, single family housing, two and three family residents and apartment buildings ranging from six to several hundred units. The neighborhood includes two elementary schools and one middle school. On or near Albany Avenue are numerous small businesses, churches, several seniors residences, adult education centers, a library, a large neighborhood health center, other community services and a number of nonprofit organizations. The integrity of most of the neighborhood is evident from the very small number of vacant lots and modern buildings interrupting the continuity of similar historic houses.

The students' charge was to create a community center. The center was to be for their use in their neighborhood. It was their vision for future development of the area. Over the course of a three hour workshop, student design teams transformed their ideas into drawings, models, and oral presentations.

One University of Hartford architecture student said, “The children seemed to enjoy working with us. They paid close attention to everything we told them. I feel it was a good experience for me because it was interesting to see how the children viewed things. They are the ones who will spend the most time in the building so I think, as an architecture student, that their ideas should be incorporated into the design.” This was also a fantastic opportunity for University of Hartford undergraduate architecture students to work side by side with Yale University School of Architecture graduate students.

B. Architect’s Day - Lego

September 1995

Architect’s Day sponsored by the Science Center of Connecticut at the former G. Fox building in Hartford involved over eighty children. The event was held in conjunction with “Inventions Adventure” a Lego exhibit at the Science Center of Connecticut in West Hartford. With the cooperation of the local architectural community, especially, Harvey B. Leibin, AIA, Vice President of DuBose Associates, Inc. Architects of Hartford, Architect’s Day - Lego was a success.

The event showcased a strong community spirit. The headline for the Sunday Hartford Courant read, “Toying with architecture gives kids view of the city.” The children with the help and support of local architects and University of Hartford architecture students had a great time creating eight of Hartford’s landmark building out of Legos. Projects included the Old State House, Wadsworth Athenaeum, and the Mark Twain House.
DuBose Architects traced as much of the buildings from photographs. The children used these two-dimensional drawings as a guide to build. Architecture student, Stacey Ruggeri said she was pleasantly surprised by the results. “The older children were helpful in explaining the drawings to the younger children. The program was a good experience for me. I was able to work on my leadership skills. The children learned how to follow directions and how to be creative.”

A mother of one Lego fan, said, “It’s great to see children working cooperatively for an end project.” A thirteen year old Hartford boy said he would pay more attention to the Old State House building next time he passed by. “I’m going to look at it with pride because I can’t believe we built that,” he said, “It was like an ordinary building to me. But now it’s like a masterpiece because we built it.” Architect Leibin said, “the Lego buildings were very impressive in terms of visual appeal and craftsmanship.”

University students worked side by side with professionals, parents and children. The operation science director for the Science Center, Edward Forand, Jr., said, “This is a great effort in teamwork. They learn about structure and they also learn to work together.”

C. Holmes School, New Britain, Connecticut
April 1994

Throughout the course of a day, the children at the Holmes School in New Britain, Connecticut created a “Box City”. The Architecture Resource Center (ARC), local architects from Kaestle Boos Architects and University of Hartford architecture students worked with the elementary school children to create a three-dimensional city. The city was built of construction paper, masking tape, lots of glue, recyclables and hundreds of white 4” x 4” boxes. The entire school community participated.

The project goal was to help children grow up with a sense of responsibility for their environment. One of the ARC architects and planners said, “We’re talking to them about teamwork, and we really do work like this. We really are a collaborative team.”

Some students organized themselves into small groups and worked together to create a variety of buildings. Buildings included: a castle, a recycling center, an energy plant, some hospitals, and quite a few malls and casinos. Fourth year architecture students worked with the children to help them communicate their ideas three-dimensionally. After constructing their buildings, individually or in design teams, students located their buildings on the city grid. As each grade participated throughout the day - the city grew and grew!

Participating in the “Box City” event helped children understand their place within the community. These children will eventually make decisions that will shape the environment. One student said, “People think it’s easy to build a city but it is not.” He did, however, go on to say, “I wish I could do this all day.”
THE ARC, HARTFORD PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITY AND THE MARY HOOKER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Architecture and design education programs developed by design professionals are nothing new. There are many fine programs in service throughout the country. The Architecture Resource Center (ARC) programs incorporate concepts found in some of the more successful programs. The difference between existing design-arts education programs and the ARC’s programs can be found in one significant area. Whereas, most of the other programs link design to one or two curriculum-based disciplines, the ARC’s programs provide a thematic context for all curriculum subjects. Architecture and design are used as the integrating theme to teach disciplines of math, science, technology, language arts, and social sciences.

The redevelopment of Hartford’s Charter Oak Housing Project has become the focus for the first community / education project of its kind in Connecticut. The Hartford ARC Project is a collaboration with the Hartford Public Housing Authority and the Mary Hooker Elementary School. The goal of this project is to involve the children living in the Hartford Public Housing Project in the design process of the redevelopment of their homes and neighborhoods and in doing so, develop the academic skills and self-esteem which will allow them to succeed in school and grow up to be productive citizens. Mary Hooker School will become the first Hartford school to use architecture and design as the interdisciplinary theme to teach the curriculum. Curriculum concepts will be directly applied to the major housing design and construction project in the students’ immediate neighborhood.

At Mary Hooker Elementary School a system of weekly design lessons create the framework for the introduction and application of architecture and design concepts. Development of a design vocabulary, application of the design process to problem solving, and the use of two and three-dimensional methods of communication are established as linking elements among the disciplines. The designed world becomes the thematic foundation for all curriculum subjects. David Marshall, Sr. Project Manager for the State of Connecticut Commission on the Arts, noted, “No other arts organization in Connecticut offers an in-school program of equivalent scope and quality . . . By working in Hartford schools, the projects clearly reaches a culturally heterogeneous audience (and) . . . offers a needed stimulus to the under served children of the system. . . The program goes beyond a simple exposure effort to actually integrating architecture with other disciplinary areas.”

With the professional support of the American Institute of Architects / Connecticut and the commitment of the Connecticut Architectural Foundation, the ARC enjoys a state-wide, multicultural network of ambassadors - some of whom are also parents - who believe in the value of the ARC programs not only for their children’s education, but also for the advancement of understanding of their professions. By maintaining a presence in the education, business, and arts communities, ARC principals have developed and maintained a productive network of referrals and recommendations for inclusion of its programs in school and festivals throughout Connecticut. The selection of the ARC as the catalyst and facilitator of educational reform in Hartford as well as New Haven and Waterbury attest to the matching of city education reform goals and the goals and education delivery system of the ARC programs. The success of all ARC
programs, including school-wide at Mary Hooker, involves commitment from school administrators, classroom and art teachers, parents, and community funders and organization.

The ARC team provides teacher training workshops, teacher consultations and weekly student design lessons. At Mary Hooker Elementary School, University of Hartford architecture students are encouraged to participate in both teacher training sessions and student design lessons. They work in conjunction with the ARC’s staff of architects and designers.

In 1997, the ARC team was recognized by the American Institute of Architects national organization with its Institute Honors Award. The award, noted the ARC “whose programs encourage distinguished achievements by the young and constitutes a beneficial influence on the environment and architectural profession. This organization’s program uplifts both adolescents and urban communities by focusing on architecture, city planning, and urban design; adding value to the enlightenment process; and showing dedication to general education and business skills.”

Jury comments from the AIA included:

• “. . . to get young at risk kids involved in urban design, architecture and city planning. The process really contributes to a general education and skill building.”
• “If the profession wants to establish the value of architecture in the larger community and change public opinion about architecture, this is the place to start.”

CLOSURE

Service learning provides fantastic experiences and opportunities for all involved. I must agree with Judith S. Berson of Broward Community College when she says, “Win/Win/Win with a Service Learning Program.”

The student “wins” because he or she is given the opportunity to implement and thereby reinforce what he or she knows. Students usually discover they know more than they realize. They “give back” to the community and enjoy the satisfaction that comes with giving. When a student says, “I think these interactive learning programs are a great idea for everyone involved,” you know it works.

The community “wins” because university students have given the gift of time and expertise. Children also learn about opportunities available to them both educationally and professionally and look to the college students as role models.

The University “wins” too. By increasing its involvement in the community there is much to be gained.

With Service Learning we cannot lose!
References


Architecture Resource Center Literature


Educational Main Street Literature