

Neighborhood Design with Community Engagement

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Minneapolis, known for its wide disparities, includes the North Minneapolis neighborhood with inequities in youth incarceration, income, education, health, home ownership, homelessness; and 80% BIPOC citizenry, hit hard with COVID, and George Floyd's death. Northside residents seek changes that reduce poverty and neighborhood isolation. The design studio goal was to co-create with local youth and residents a design that employs public realm investment to reconnect the segregated neighborhood to city, with mixed-income housing, financing that enables wealth-building, and human services.

The project research team comprised a neighborhood organization executive director, a community advocate and architectural firm owner, the VP of a development organization, and from the university, experienced in urban participatory design, a researcher, and a design professor of architecture. An advisory group of experts informed the project.

Presently, streets and highways block access to three potential neighborhood assets, downtown, the local river, and a city park. The first year of a three-year project aimed to reconnect the neighborhood to adjacent areas while addressing housing and social services as topics of focus. Geodesign, a GIS-based approach to sustainable participation was the tool of engagement in community meetings, addressing ten topics or urban design layers (

Several factors required changing the original direction of the studio, including: holding community meetings online instead of in person, a difficulty in recruiting youth interns, strong community interest in key ideas, and a resistance among the community participants to normative urban design practices.

The paper describes the engagement process, the changes in approach and final designs, answering such questions as: How did recruitment and retention work? How and why did the design approach change? What was learned from the participatory process? How did the community and university students work together? How did youth participate? What were community aspirations? How did designs address the neighborhood disparities?

KEYWORDS: Community, Equity

PAPER SESSION TRACK: Inclusive Urban Landscapes

INTRODUCTION

Minneapolis has high levels of income, health care, education, but also high disparities between white and Black populations, due to segregation from redlining and other discriminatory housing practices. Today Northside neighborhoods have significantly lower income, high school graduation rates, home ownership, health indicators and business investment than white neighborhoods (LISC 2014).

In the 1960s, the I-94 freeway divided Northside Minneapolis neighborhoods from the Mississippi River. Disadvantaged by poverty, inequitable wealth accumulation and inequitable public investment, these neighborhoods remain isolated from the rest of the city. Unlike riverside neighborhoods to the south that incorporate the Great River Road, accessible parkland, and pedestrian and bicycle paths along the river, this neighborhood's riverside area remains industrial, with unpaved streets, no sidewalks, no parkland, disorganized pedestrian and bicycle paths, and access blocked by the below-ground highway, reflecting its great disparities. The studio's goal is to reconnect the neighborhood along the river and through the neighborhood to the Minneapolis Park System Grand Rounds. By taking a comprehensive approach that addresses housing, education, health, culture, jobs, regenerative design, ecology and more, we will address not just the vision, but the means of achieving it.

The history of city planning in North Minneapolis is controversial because the community continues to see the results as not benefitting the Northside residents, but rather the already existing developers and power structure. (Bell & Bauknight 2020)

Typically, Minneapolis urban designs are developed by the city and the community responds in a series of meetings. Minneapolis urban planners developed a city-wide urban plan called created Minneapolis 2040, and then proposed applying it in North Minneapolis in the Upper Harbor Terminal Project (UHRP). Now being implemented, UHTP is located on the river north of undeveloped site chosen for the studio. The city hired a developer to work with community members to generate a design. Although the community was engaged in the design, in the implementation process, the community ideas were subverted and outside investors gained from the development, rather than members of the community (Bell & Bauknight 2020). In contrast, the goal of the studio was to develop an agreed-upon plan that challenges the status quo of the marginalized community of color. The outcome was intended to be a research-informed, equitable, regenerative, community-developed-and-supported plan that would powerfully communicate the parameters of the Northside's transformative vision to the city prior to the city's planning process for this site. The intention is to get ahead of the city, so they are responding to the community design, rather than the reverse. While the research team saw this as a three-year project for the studio, we anticipated that at the end of the first studio we would have a first draft co-designed plan that the community members would agree upon.

1.0 THE RESEARCH TEAM

Julia Robinson, the class instructor, worked with community participants for two years, in a similar studio that explored the architectural implications of preventing juvenile detention, (Robinson & Price, 2021). She met Jamil Ford, owner of Mobilize Design Architects and Planners, when he organized a site visit for the class. Having become familiar with North Minneapolis through her work, she saw the undeveloped site along the river at the east of the neighborhood as a possible site of intervention that could transform the neighborhood using community-based planning. She mentioned her interest to Mr. Ford. Having witnessed the problems with the process of the Upper Harbor Terminal Project, he agreed that this site had potential leverage power for neighborhood change, and Robinson and Ford created a research team to implement the project. To represent the community's perspective in the design process they sought to recruit 20 adult community members and six youth interns aged 18-26.

The research team consisted of Ford, Robinson, Cathy Spann, Executive Director of an active North Minneapolis neighborhood organization, Timothy Griffin, expert on Geodesign, and Brandon Champeau, Senior Vice President of United Properties, the controversial developer for the UHT project, which provided matching funds for several grants the team sought funding for. The neighborhood group would provide stipends for community and youth participants, and the School of Architecture would support the studio. The grant funds would provide support for consultants, for research assistants, and for developing a community exhibition at the end of the project. As a part of the grant application process, the team sought, and received support from a variety of additional organizations, including the Center for Sustainable Building Research, the Minnesota Design Center, AIA Minnesota, and individuals at the Minneapolis Park Board and the Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development. Representatives from these and other organizations agreed to participate as part of an Expert Advisory Group, that would help educate the students about urban design issues and serve on design studio reviews.

Although no additional funding was provided other than what was originally to be matching funds, the project proceeded with support for research assistants, stipends, with minimal support for consultants. BIPOC design professionals who practice regionally were invited to participate on design reviews as well.

2.0 THE PLANNED STUDIO STRUCTURE

The design studio was a research-based class for undergraduate pre-professional students in their final year of study. In this studio, students are given a taste of working in a professional situation. In a fifteen-week semester, informed by community and research experts, students were to work with community members and youth interns to develop a shared neighborhood design in the first half of the semester. This design was to be informed by Twenty-first Century Development Standards (21CS) developed by AIA Minnesota (American Institute of Architects Minnesota et al 2014), and use the Geodesign method (Steinitz 2012), previously implemented in similar projects by team member Griffin with the Minnesota Design Center. University students would prepare work in response to community feedback, working one day a week with neighborhood youth interns. The project affiliated with the Robert L. Jones University Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC) located in North Minneapolis, where we held classes on many Wednesdays.

During the first half of the semester, students and interns would 1) study precedents (regenerative and equitable urban designs, taken from the 21CS and other sources), 2) complete an urban analysis of the neighborhood using the many online sources of data for the ten Geodesign layers of information (water, agriculture and food, green space, energy, housing, institutions, industry and commerce, transportation, economic development and equity), 3) develop design innovations options for each Geodesign layer, and with the community 4) using this information, co-design urban proposals that addressed social and ecological challenges in community meetings. Timothy Griffin, our expert on Geodesign, would advise us on how to present materials to the community, as the student and intern work was to be generate discussions with neighborhood participants at a series of community meetings. Since the community meetings were outside of class hours, students could not be required to attend the meetings, but those who could, would join to

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present their work and collaborate on design. Meeting in person, community participants would, at different meetings, discuss research, innovative designs and policies, and negotiate a final developed design. These community meetings were to be held in the neighborhood, or if necessary, at meetings on the internet.

In the second half of the semester, students were to develop design ideas from final urban design, at the scale of building, landscape, or urbanscape that would demonstrate how the design might be implemented.

3.0 THE PLANNED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The implementation plan was for the community participants to co-create with students and interns an urban design. Young adult interns were to participate in an orientation session, to work with the studio one day a week, and to attend community meetings. The co-design process was to take place at 5 in-person meetings based on the Geodesign process, each lasting 90 minutes in the first half of the semester. Student and intern work would serve as the basis for discussion and decision-making, as community participants would work in groups to discuss and evaluate design options, and create designs by locating selected design options on maps of the urban site

In the second half, based on the co-designed plan, and participant ideas, the students and interns would develop designs to illustrate what the implemented plan might be like, and to present the design proposals (buildings, systems, or landscape elements) to community participants at two additional 90-minute meetings, one for feedback and the other to see the final design. The 90-minute meeting time was chosen because that was the time between the end of design studio at 5:30, and the beginning of Bible study at 7:00 pm.

Community participants were to be recruited starting in June by the Executive Director of a neighborhood organization. The young adult interns were to be recruited by a person experienced in organizing and instructing youth programs for the schools, park board and the university.

4.0 THE ACTUAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS & ITS EFFECT ON THE STUDIO

Although the recruitment of community participants and interns was supposed to begin in the spring, due to various unavoidable circumstances, the process did not begin until mid-summer. Additionally, without the funding originally sought, we reduced the number of participants. By our first meeting in August, we surpassed our minimum recruitment goal of ten community participants, however as church members, the participants were older and somewhat conservative. Additionally, we were only able to recruit one intern, someone who had some architectural education. This allowed us to change the participation to adjust his participation to include review of projects as well as attending community meetings. Toward the end of the semester, we were able to invite five young adults to review the student projects. They provided a very different perspective from the community members, more open to contemporary designs especially on the river, and to cooperative developments.

Due to COVID restrictions, between August and November, no community spaces were available for meetings of 20 or more people in North Minneapolis. As a result, all the planned community meetings were held on Zoom. This, combined with the limitation of the 90-minutes, greatly impacted the ability to co-design during meetings. At each meeting we had a brief time for check-in and introducing the procedure at the beginning of the meeting, discussion during the meeting, and at the end a brief time for summarizing what was learned.

Meeting #1- Orientation

The first community meeting with community members, research team members and the intern, went as planned with introductions of all participants, and of the project. This meeting did not include students, as it was held in August, before the semester had begun. Community participants presented their goals for the community and ideas about how developing the river site might be done so that the neighborhood would be a destination rather than a pass-by area.

Meeting #2- Neighborhood Research

At the second, September community meeting, students presented their research on the ten Geodesign topics for North Minneapolis neighborhood and the city. The research was grouped into 6 subject areas. If the meeting had been in person, we would have had three group discussions with each group covering two topics. The circumstances led us to instead have two breakout rooms. Because of the limited meeting time, and the need to have discussion, each student team summarize their work in a 2-minute video that was presented after the check-in. Subsequently everyone in the meeting was assigned to the two breakout rooms for the discussion. In each breakout room one or more student team members were present to respond to informational questions were raised in discussion of the research. The community members were surprised by many of the findings, and clarified their concerns, and community goals. They were very interested in research that compared their neighborhood to others in the city. The main issues they raised were safety, healthy food access, homeownership and wealth building, creating a community center and a concern that the level of asthma in their neighborhood was the highest in the city, likely due to the proximity to the industrial area.

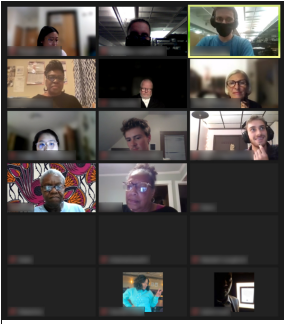


Image of Zoom Meeting #3

Meeting #3- Design & Policy Innovations

Following the Geodesign approach, with feedback from our intern, each student developed ten design innovations in thirteen topic areas. Similarly, to the previous meeting, each student created a 3-minute video summarizing their innovations. They also made a poster with all of the innovations on it. But this time, half were presented in each breakout room, and community members, commented on the innovations, explaining which they thought were applicable in their neighborhood. One breakout group voted on options they thought would be good to pursue. The other group discussed several ideas, especially food and housing. The community participants were most interested in innovations that were developed in their neighborhood or relatively local. They especially appreciated innovations that were associated with organizations they knew.

Meeting #4 – Four Urban Designs

Typically, at the fourth Geodesign Meeting, participants are assigned to four groups representing different points of view (such as business, resident, government, and non-profit agency). Then each group chooses innovations they like, placing them where they think they will work, on maps of the neighborhood. At the previous meeting, the participants became familiar with only some of the innovations. Furthermore, asking people to place innovations on maps, which would be simple in person, would not work well on Zoom. So, we decided to create four plans that represented the goals of the residents (design for health and wellness, design for youth, design for sustainability and design for community), and to assign the innovations that residents liked to one of the four designs. Each team was asked to show how the innovation would work in the existing neighborhood context and how it would work on the river site. The drawings used to delineate the ideas were bird's eye axonometric drawings. We prepared a poll for attendees to tell us what the liked about the different schemes. Once again, each team created a short video, two of which were presented in each of the two breakout rooms for discussion, with students present to answer questions and hear the resident response.

The community participants did not respond well to the plans, especially the designs for the new area along the river. In one breakout room participants filled out the polls on the designs, but in the other this was not done. For many, it was more important to improve the existing neighborhood than to plan for new innovations on the river site, and even designs that tied the new development to the existing area were not appreciated. They commented that the designs did not appear to take the residents' ideas seriously and looked as if we were playing "Sim City" with our designs. Our approach was considered top-down rather than bottom up. One person said that we were applying the White person's way of urban design. We had divided the urban design into variables and were recombining them rather than developing integrated designs. We had a review earlier that day where design professionals had liked the designs and realized our normative planning approach might be important to question.

Our designs generated an urban scale plan that used bird's eye view without including eye-level views and sketches. It might have been better received had we included eye-level views and sketches, and certainly if the participants had chosen and located the design elements themselves. Considering how to approach the remaining six or seven weeks of the semester, we decided that developing a comprehensive urban design for the area would not be responsive to the residents' concerns. Instead, we focused on designing particular projects that show how the residents' ideas might be applied in the neighborhood and on the river site.

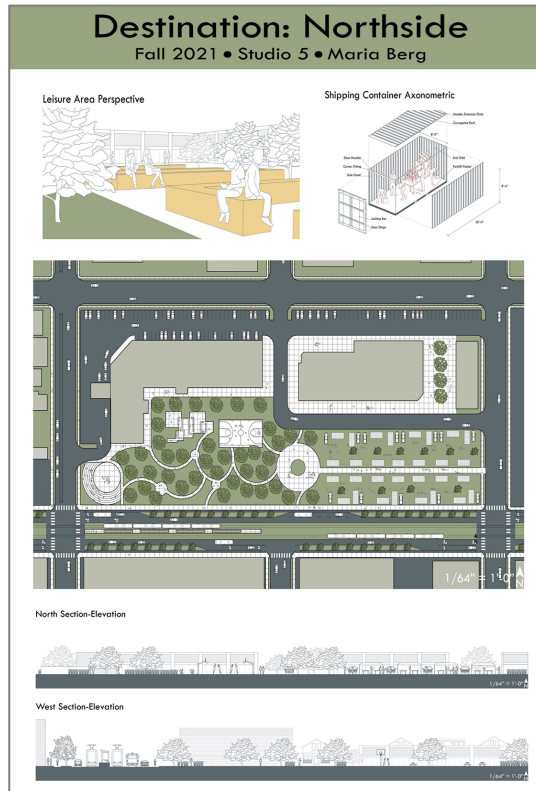
Meeting #5- Asking Questions

The fifth meeting in the Geodesign protocol is where the community members negotiate a shared design. Having abandoned the idea of a shared urban design, the class decided the students would organize this meeting to find answers to questions that had arisen about different aspects of the neighborhood and the residents' ideas. They compiled a list of questions and selected the 14 most relevant. Four or five students ran the meeting including discussions of half the questions in two breakout rooms. Participants provided lists of places they wanted the community to have, reasons why they didn't like dense housing, how to take advantage of the river, as well as ideas for wealth building, economic development, and urban farming.

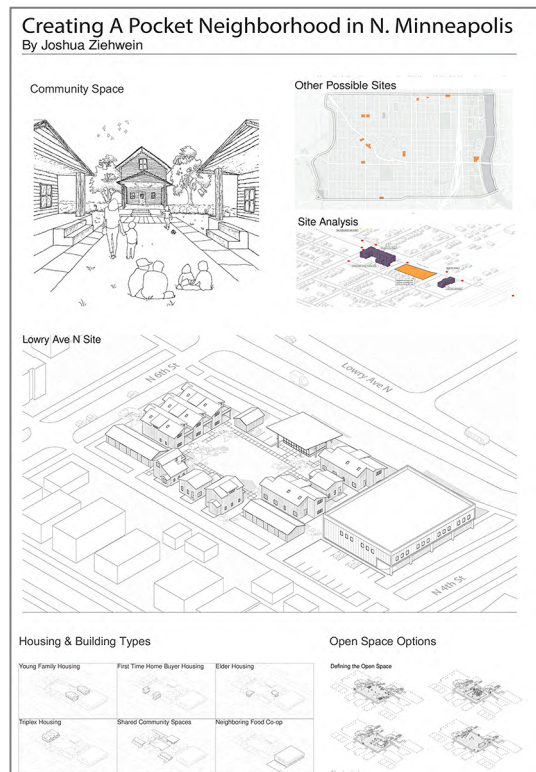
After this meeting the students had the opportunity to meet in person with young adults who responded to their proposed vision projects for the next phase. At this pin-up session, the students found the feedback specific to their projects that contrasted with the feedback from the community meetings very helpful.



Informal Review of project program and design proposal with Young Adults after Meeting 5.



Destination Northside (Light Rail Stop, Performance Amphitheater, & Market) Maria Berg, Arch 5212, Fall 2021



Creating a Pocket Neighborhood in North Minneapolis (Missing Middle Cooperative Housing with Community Courtyard on Land Trust Site), Joshua Ziehwein, Arch 5212, Fall 2021

Meeting #6. Review of Student Vision Designs (to be completed for the January final version)

The sixth meeting focused on the student proposals with four breakout rooms. Within each breakout room, two students presented two to three of the eleven proposals for feedback. Participants responded with such ideas as helpful suggestions about siting in the neighborhood, questions about the efficacy of land trusts, and saying what they didn't understand. While they questioned some of the particular design choices, overall, they supported the project choices. This helped the students frame their final proposals, informing them how to develop their designs and refine their arguments to be more convincing.

Meeting #7. Final Vision Design We had hoped that this meeting could be held in person, but the community members chose to have it on Zoom. The students had presented their work for the final review five days earlier. Although we again planned for four breakout rooms so students work could have detailed attention, the community attendees thought it would be better to have more participants in each room, so we ended up with three. The community members were very enthusiastic about the student work, saying that it needed to be presented to the city planners before they made their designs. They stated that their ideas were well-represented and thanked the students for the thoughtful work.

This spring semester the project is funded to develop an exhibition to show the work in neighborhood settings in late spring and over the summer, as we recruit participants for the next year. Several of the community members are organizing a meeting with the mayor to present the student work. Next year we plan to work with a Northside community garden organizer to bring youth interns to the project and a more active participatory approach to the engagement process.

5.0 WHAT WE LEARNED

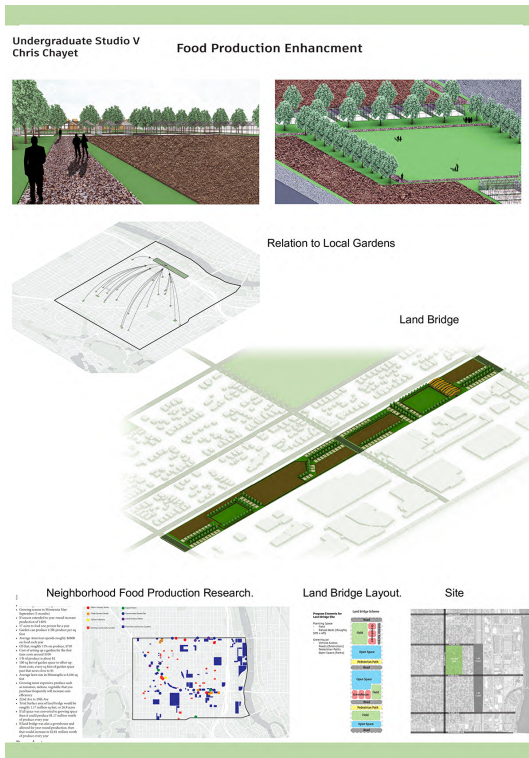
Recruitment. Traditional modes of recruitment, for example with a church, may result in an older community group with a shared, more conservative perspective. However, such a group is likely be committed to the project and consistently attend meetings. Adults with children have difficulty attending community meetings. It is difficult to recruit young adults who may have an unpredictable agenda. Young people who are high school are easier to identify and systematically participate than older youth. The students wanted to go out into the community and talk with residents informally, which was also suggested by several design critics. There were two reasons they were discouraged from doing so. First, local research team members asserted that the neighborhood was unsafe due to many shootings. Second, the neighborhood is a subject of many studies, and we did not want to be invasive. For the next phase, we will create a larger group of participants, and better age balance, by beginning recruitment in the spring.

Community Design. It is essential to find out about the existing community activities and organizations. Without knowing these and how they work in the community, it is impossible to be credible in making proposals. As a part of our cooperation with the Gardening Activist, we are receiving a list of local organizations that will allow to to develop contacts for students to talk with about the neighborhood, and for engagement in the design work. We also need longer meeting times, perhaps substituting charettes for some meetings.

Contradictory Ideas. Often within a community, group ideas will be expressed that seem to contradict each other. However, as one probes the reasoning behind the two ideas, what at first appears to be contradictory, can be seen as simply two different ways of seeing a situation, and two different approaches to an agreed-upon problem. Then one can explore the nature of the problem and possibly propose a solution different than either of the initial contradictions. With longer meeting times, this may take place exploring ideas with the community members.

Working with young adults. Originally, the idea was to have the interns work side-by-side with the university students. Due to limitations in time spent together, and the students desire to hear young people's ideas about the neighborhood and their response to student projects, having interns and young adults review projects in pin-up sessions and other reviews turned out to be a very productive form of participation. We seek funding for interns, but if that doesn't work out, we will include youth as members of the community engagement group. We found the younger people to be less hesitant to consider new ideas. Having them in the group expands the range of bottom-up thinking.

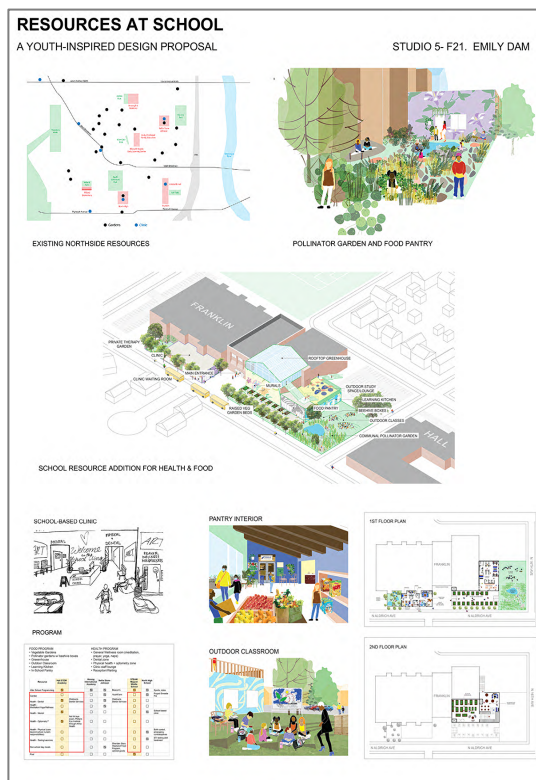
Community Aspirations. Foremost for community members was having a safe neighborhood. There was interest in affordable housing and wealth-building through home ownership and through business development. Job training and developing entrepreneurship was highly valued. But the most shared aspiration was having urban farming that gives young people activities after school and produces healthy food for the community. For next year, we will use urban farming as a framing program, and will incorporate a bigger emphasis on crime reduction, perhaps making it one of the geodesign layers.



Food Production Enhancement (Land Bridge for Urban Farming & Greenhouses Connecting to Riverside Area), Chris Chayet, Arch 5212, Fall 2021

Addressing Disparities in Designs. The eleven projects completed by the students addressed several issues. Several designs addressed ways to connect to the river across the I-94 highway that separates the main neighborhood from the river. Other designs proposed transforming the industrial area along the river to other functions, especially business and housing. Some proposals developed affordable communities of middle housing with shared amenities. Housing for young adults is another theme, as there are a great many youths graduating from foster care, or who are homeless and struggling to find housing. Several projects addressed food production and distribution. Another theme was to provide places for after school activities for youth who need a place to be and to study away from home. All of these responded to resident observations of community needs. Next year, having more interaction of participants with maps and design options should facilitate a more bottom-up approach.

Standard Urban Design Approach. The standard approach to urban design is to construct the environment as a series of parts that can be assembled in a variety of ways. Typically, these are represented as maps, plans, axonometric drawings, or bird's eye perspectives. This way of thinking can be seen as top-down design which doesn't address the actual use and experience of the environment, nor the complexity of the integrated whole. Some people see this approach as a white person's way of urban design, suggesting that different approaches to design be developed that start from a bottom-up understanding more integral with experience than abstracted from reality, and that is more related to the inhabitant. This is a challenge to be taken up in future studios, by developing more interactivity at the beginning of the design process, and by enhancing the experiential side of



A School Resource Center (Addressing Disparities in Services Provided at Elementary and Middle Schools), Emily Dam, Architecture 5212, Fall 2021

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design in the ways material is manipulated by and presented to participants

CONCLUSIONS

Leading a design studio that engages with communities is very challenging. It requires considerable lead time to identify community participants and develop appropriate community engagement strategies, whether meetings, charettes or other forms. It may be impossible to find fully representative community participants. A project budget needs to include funds for stipends at a good hourly rate such as \$25/ hour for adults. Ideally, one would also pay for speakers and for reviewers' time. We used consultants to recruit, but ran into difficulties with interns, because we focused on young people 18-26, which turned out to be a difficult demographic.

Time consuming activities include arranging for meetings and reviews and communicating with participants and reviewers with reminders and updates. The schedule may be in a state of flux throughout the entire term. To create some stability, it can be important to develop key dates as markers in the term and maintain these as much as possible.

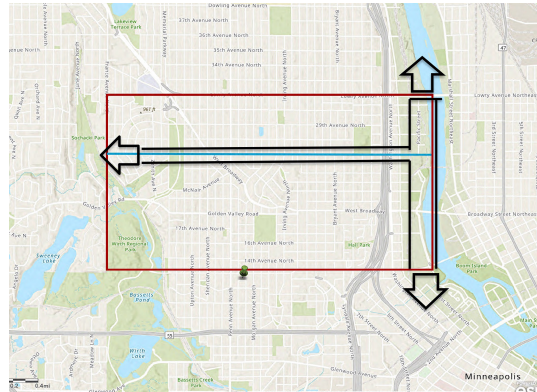
Perhaps most exciting, and stressful, is the process of working with students. Working with students to communicate schedule changes, perhaps due to speakers' agendas, to develop appropriate review formats, to develop meaningful discussions of readings, requires constant attention.

Students may bring their own ideas about how such a studio ought to be run. It requires special attention to student concerns and insecurities about having insufficient information. As designers we know information is essential to good design. We also know it is rarely possible to have all the information one needs to design. This paradox is very problematic, and students may require assurance that they are on a good path. Listening to communities, while essential, also often results in hearing contradictory messages, as we mentioned earlier, which complicates, rather than simplifying design decisions for students. And as the class progresses, and one learns about students and community members, it is important to be willing to change direction in response to new information.

Teaching a studio that engages community members is not for the faint-of-heart. Each studio experience is unique, and a pioneering effort. It is frustrating if community members, reviewers, speakers, or students are not able to participate as planned, or if they make unhelpful critical remarks. If even one student does not listen to community members, the entire class may be blamed. On the other hand, community members are often stimulated and motivated by the student ideas. If the project is successful, community participants may discover an appreciation for the potential of their community to develop productively. Ideally, both students and community participants will be inspired to commit to making all neighborhoods a better place to live.

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The project site in North Minneapolis showing the Mississippi River to the east of the site, and I-94 highway (in gray), dividing the presently industrial area along the Mississippi River from the predominantly residential area to the west. Arrows indicate the desire to connect the neighborhood to the parkway north and south along the River, and to the Theodore Wirth Park and lakes to the far west and southwest (part of the "Grand Rounds" of the Minneapolis Park system),