SYMPOSIUM: GOING LIVE: RECONCILING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PRACTICES WITH COMMUNITY EXPECTATION (3 papers)

The Eureka Project: Analyzing a Tripartite Model for Collaboration

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Introduction

Small rural towns are in general relatively underserved contexts for design services; architects, designers, and planners, however, are often integral to fostering community vitalization. It is in this gap between need and available service that the Small Town Studio operates. The Studio immerses students in a small town context, exposes them to the realities of project definition and management, addresses issues facing small towns, and ultimately realizes both tangible and intangible outcomes for these towns.

The Studio has partnered prominently with the city of Eureka, Kansas, where more than a dozen projects have been pursued. A tripartite partnership was conceived to achieve the Studio's goals. Students under faculty guidance provide research, visualization, consensus-building, and early-stage project management; community stakeholders inform student progress and invest in noteworthy projects; and practicing professionals are well-placed to take on community-identified projects and see them to completion. This model utilizes each type of organization to the best of its abilities and simultaneously maximizes benefits. The end result is a managed system of engagement, development, and execution of projects that forward the interests of the citizens of small town Kansas. This paper will examine the effectiveness of this model through the common, developed framework of analysis.

Context of this Study: Issues and Basis of Work

The plight of rural communities in Kansas is contextually representative of many Midwestern American states. A close, relatively recent survey of extant small Kansas towns can be found in Richard Wood's book "Survival of Rural America."[1] Wood describes the number of issues small Kansas towns face include depopulation, declining economic and health indicators, and aging.[1] Wood's narrative is not entirely bleak. He notes a number of small towns that have been able to improve their built infrastructure, services, and resources, enhancing the lives of townspeople and even encouraging the settlement of new residents.[1] Wood's narrative, coupled with an examination of rural-based community design centers across the US, provided the impetus for the formation of the Small Town Studio.

The Studio, under the aegis of Kansas State University's Department of Architecture, has delivered student-generated design services to rural communities across Kansas since the fall of 2012. In that time, the Studio has engaged with seven distinct municipalities; an ongoing relationship with the town of Eureka has been the Studio's most prominent effort. In Eureka, the Small Town Studio found a municipality eager to parlay with the academic realm, in the hope of generating interest and activity in the relatively isolated town. Architecture students were able to work closely with community stakeholders on a variety of projects. The student work has been self-published in two volumes: *Small Town Stewardship: Community Design for Vitality and Growth* and *Small Town Stewardship: Design for the Campestral*.

Fig. 1. Example of Small Town Studio project in Eureka: the redesign of the county courthouse plaza. The student project was enthusiastically adopted by the community, though has not yet been built.

The Small Town Studio's tripartite model

There are a number of community design centers around the US; a quick survey of the Association for Community Design's membership indicates that roughly half of these are based in universities. The Small Town Studio has adopted the methods normally utilized by other design centers, but with university faculty and students, and community stakeholders, has included a third party in its efforts: practicing professionals. Each constituency adds value and retains benefits from the partnership. Communities gain the expertise and energy of faculty, students, and professionals, allowing design

efforts to be more likely to be implemented. Community members are the main source of information for student efforts, and provide valuable feedback for designs. University faculty and students contribute energy, time, objectivity, research, design and sometimes construction activity to projects established in consultation with community and professional partners. Students gain learning and experience in client and community relations, pre-project organization, fundraising, consensus-building, and a number of other skills that will enhance their understanding of the profession of architecture. Practicing professionals contribute advice and oversight to projects, and in turn gain fees from projects to be constructed, develop inroads with new client bases, and receive support from university students and faculty in terms of the prosecution of pre-project activities, which are often not billable hours.

Engaged Design Projects: a 'Dearth' of Evaluation

Though university-community engagement is widely encouraged by universities, governmental agencies, and other institutions[2], assessment of the wide range of efforts (architectural design projects in particular) has as yet not been well documented. McRae further states that while "discourse on engagement is well-established… specific implementation strategies are not." [2] The National League of Cities, a US agency that promotes civic engagement practices, developed a checklist for the development of engagement efforts; the checklist includes five strategies (more or less chronological) that activists should develop and employ:

- Circulating Information
- Discussing and Connecting
- Gathering Initial Input
- Deliberating and Recommending
- Deciding and Acting[3]

Notably missing is a sector of effort devoted to analyzing efforts, gathering responses to activities, or any other evaluative aspect to engaged projects. Rowe (et al) questioned empirically whether or not university-community engaged projects are in fact valuable, remarking on the lack of assessment of engaged activity, citing in particular "very few cases of empirical evaluation."[4] Rowe ascribes two rationales for this evidentiary "dearth:" one, that the act of engagement is itself considered the end result, regardless of whether the process is valued after the fact; and two, that evaluation of engaged projects is inherently "difficult."[4] Rowe states that neither reason for the absence of post-project evaluation is particularly satisfactory. Rowe's central contention is that there is no accepted framework for the analysis of any qualitative metric of engaged projects to be evaluated, and in his paper he attempts to address this by first establishing a definition of success and implementing a system of quantitative evaluation for a case study project.

The primary issue examined here is the formulation of a metric to evaluate the "success," "effectiveness," and to some degree "efficiency" of services rendered. Of particular interest is the perceived value of the engaged, live format of the Eureka Project to community stakeholders.

Evaluation and an Architecture of Engagement

As an ongoing architectural design effort, the Eureka Project has another layer of complication to that of less tangible engagement efforts, particularly in terms of evaluation. Historically, architects have not been particularly involved in the evaluation of the impact of their projects after they have been completed. Like the National League of City's approach to engagement, architectural design projects concentrate most of their efforts on pre-design, design, and construction phases of a project. Post-project evaluation, when it occurs, is elective and somewhat narrowly focused, normally concerned with building performance metrics. This type of evaluation was developed to further the goals of energy efficiency and other building-focused sustainability aims, and is not a good fit for the evaluation of community engagement efforts. The impact of the building or (as discussed here) the design process on the project's owners, occupants, visitors, or the community at large is rarely addressed in post-occupancy evaluations.

One evaluation system for engaged design projects has recently been implemented. The SEED Evaluator, developed under the guidance of public-interest design advocates Bryan Bell, Maurice Cox, Kathy Dorgan and Stephen Goldsmith and administered by Design Corps, is a system to qualitatively evaluate the social, economic, and environmental "success" of community-oriented projects.[5] The system promotes social justice as one of three main qualitative goals, as can be seen in its first three principles:

- advocate with those who have a limited voice in public life
- build structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow communities to make decisions
- promote social equality through discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities. [5]

Further, the SEED Network cites accountability to stakeholders (which could include community members) is one of the four benefits of applying the system of analysis to projects.[3] Certification under SEED is not routinized, however. The system allows each project to determine the metrics by which the project's success is measured. As such, the system does not answer Rowe's call for a universal framework of analysis.

Applying a Systematic Metric to the Eureka Project

For the purposes of this paper and two others to be presented in symposium (authored by Bruce Wrightsman and Katie Kingery-Page), a common method of assessment was established. A series of six open-ended questions (five qualitative and one informational) would be asked of specific stakeholders. Responses to the five common qualitative questions would be screened through a series of four thematic concerns: overall project organization, regulatory issues, responsibility/liability for project outcome, and financial issues. In order to assess the common evaluative method, two Eureka Project stakeholders were interviewed for this paper. It was anticipated that results from this first round of evaluation would help to refine the evaluative approach and increase its effectiveness and potential for broadened use.

Stakeholder responses to questions

The first question asked what the rationale was for the stakeholder to engage in the live project. Cited by the stakeholders were the notion of bringing in "energy," "youth," and contemporary design. "Seeing students in town signifies hope," said one respondent. The objective nature of outside intervention in the problems Eureka faces was seen as an advantage, as students, faculty, and professionals were not emotionally tied to issues under consideration.

The second question considered the process of the project in particular. How was the project seen to be prosecuted? The respondents seemed to be more positive about projects that had tangible results. They cited three built examples – the Eureka Studio storefront, Gallery M, the only art gallery in the county, designed and partially constructed by Small Town Studio Students, and the design, construction, and installation of public benches. Of value to the respondents were not just the notion of new construction and subsequent activity in the downtown area of Eureka, but the infusion of a new style of design.

Another aspect of project prosecution that was valued was the utilization of media, including online, newspaper, and radio broadcasts, to reach out to the community at large. The Small Town studio "put their voice out," said respondents, and made people reconsider the future.

One aspect of project prosecution that was not perceives as working well was organization issues. In the fall of 2013, two different community organizations, four professional firms, and a host of other stakeholders were involved in ongoing projects to various degrees. "Leadership conflicts" arose, particularly between the Small Town Studio (headquartered at K-State's Manhattan campus) and the newly formed agency Eureka Studio, a non-profit located in Eureka (2.5 hours from Manhattan). Once the Eureka Studio's role was defined, by the winter of 2013, relations between the Small Town Studio and Eureka Studio stabilized. The relative absence of the faculty project director in resolving these issues was noted. Students, it was said, would have benefitted from more direction from their faculty.

The third question asked how different the engaged project was from other projects the respondent was involved in. One important aspect noted was that engaged university projects had different priorities. Normative construction projects are focused on being completed and keeping the project client happy. A project with an academic component is more concerned with what can be learned from the project. The prosecution of the project is emphasized rather than simply the outcome.

The benefit of the collaboration was the focus of question four. Continuing the discussion on learning, the respondents mentioned that these engaged projects were a learning experience for the community. Another advantaged mentioned was that having the Small Town Studio as an ally "relieved some of the pressure" of executing projects. Clients seemed to be more forgiving in terms of schedule and outcome. That the university was present in Eureka was seen as symbolic in terms of addressing the town's decline. A "psychological change" was mentioned, with townspeople seeming more optimistic. Projects executed seemed to be met with more positivity than the respondents expected.

The last qualitative question asked about challenges of the project. "Too many cooks in the kitchen" was seen as a negative aspect, echoing earlier discussion of leadership issues. Still lacking in the ongoing project is a clear roadmap for moving projects from concept to completion, with actual built projects seen as being the most difficult type to finish. In a way, said respondents, there are too many ideas. The public in Eureka seemed to be somewhat overwhelmed by the many new student ideations.

Considering responses in light of four common themes

The four themes agreed upon by the symposium organizers are used as a way to assess responses at a larger level than simply addressing responses individually. Ideally this will allow for more objective consideration of respondents' commentary. The first theme, organization, seemed to be a major concern, though not necessarily in the prosecution of projects. Of greater concern was the overall relationship between the different constituencies: community stakeholders and organizations, the academy, and to a smaller degree the relationship with professional firms. Though it is unlikely that the three constituencies will ever fully align in terms of priorities, operational models, and desired outcomes, the criticism was seen as valid and will be focused on in the future. The advantages of the

collaboration were noted many times in the stakeholders' responses, seeming to outweigh the previously mentioned negative perception.

The second theme, federal, state, and local regulation, did not seem to be of concern to the stakeholders. Responsibility for specific projects, interestingly, was also not of major concern. There was some discussion about how projects in Eureka were ratified, particularly that the city council is the body that approves projects. In the past year, a number of student projects were brought forward to the council and approved; many of these projects have been slow to be physically realized. Using prudence in future dealings with the city council was recommended, essentially advising not to approach the council until the project was designed, funded, and ready to go.

The last metric, the budget and other fiscal aspects of the Eureka Project, was also not of major concern. The Small Town Studio has been somewhat proactive in securing grant money and in-kind donations for general operations as well as project-specific use. That financial issues were not seen as particularly problematic can be read as a positive response.

Assessing the Assessment Method

The survey of five qualitative, subjective questions seemed to have some value. A great deal of discussion was generated, and stakeholders did not seem to shy away from discussing negative as well as positive aspects. This type of feedback is of some importance considering the Small Town Studio will work in Eureka after the survey, and will also extend its efforts to other towns in Kansas. Strengthening the Studio's approach to engagement is the ultimate goal of assessment; expanding the scope of the survey to include a wide number of respondents will help to ratify findings.

As the Small Town Studio continues to operate, in Eureka and elsewhere, using a survey instrument longitudinally will also be of benefit. Feedback over time can be very useful in refining expectations, goals, operations, and outcomes.

Questions about the assessment arise, however. The particular questions utilized may not be narrowly enough defined to allow for quantitative analysis, the method preferred by Rowe and his colleagues over pure subjectivity. The questions were intentionally kept broad, as they were to be applied to three different initiatives of varying scope. A meta-analysis of the responses to the three initiatives should be undertaken, to see if the five questions were indeed of value; so too should be examined the four themes by which responses were assessed. In terms of the Eureka Project, only one of the four themes was particularly emphasized by initial respondents.

A survey instrument, however, is only one means to measure success; additional types of evidence are warranted.

Adopting Additional Evaluative Measures

As Rowe intimated, and others have mentioned[6], success for an engaged, live architectural project is bound up in the prosecution of the project itself. The fact that the engagement took place at all is perceived to be success. The Eureka Project, however, can be evaluated through other means. Taking the fact that three constituencies have been involved in the project (community, academy, profession), one could examine the involvement of each group, and the payoffs they've obtained by this involvement.

Academy: participation and payoff

Bulot and Johnson examined the nature of service-learning in the pursuit of educating students to be involved in social work related to aging. One aspect mentioned in their article is that lessons derived in a service-learning format tend to stick better than purely academic lessons. [7] Faculty involved in the Small Town Studio have noted students to be intensely focused on their projects, maximizing the return to the community as well as the educational value of their efforts. Students seem to recognize this, too. Each year's Small Town Studio class was required to record their impressions of the work they had undertaken. Student impressions were uniformly positive in terms of the amount they learned over the academic year, the importance of their engagement with community stakeholders, and the broadening of their understanding of how architectural-scale projects are executed.

Bulot & Johnson's article focused on the impact of engaged projects on faculty. Of note in their research was the interaction between faculty and community members, or lack thereof. There is no standardized method of project prosecution between faculty and community, and the historic lack of communication is described by the two as a liability, or "cost." [7] Other faculty liabilities include time available; in their survey of service-learning program directors, 64% of them indicated that they didn't have sufficient time to administer their programs; the time commitment associated with service learning is "costly but worth it." [7] Faculty involved in the Small Town Studio (primarily this author) agrees with Bulot & Johnson's description of the value of engaged academic projects: that teaching in this format is anecdotally rewarding. At K-State, some effort has been made to promote faculty outreach to communities, and the Small Town Studio work has received some recognition at the university level, including an award for engagement and a small grant.

Community: concrete metrics

The survey utilized here was directed at community stakeholders; as such, their impressions have been recorded above. What the community as a whole is interested in, in general, are the tangible outcomes of student involvement. How do student projects positively contribute to the town? One way to answer this is to examine the built works of the Eureka Project, which to date include two interior renovations, three temporary art installations and public amenities (benches). A pavilion is under construction at the local school, and another is slated to be constructed this fall.

Fig. 2. Eureka Studio Headquarters, built student project.

Profession: engagement and realization

Including practicing professionals has been an important aspect of the Eureka Project. Two professional architects and two construction firms have worked closely with the studio, helping students get projects started, coaching their efforts at communication, and evaluating their progress. Of the three groups, one construction firm has directly received funding by implementing student-generated projects; one of the architects has been engaged by community members on related projects, and the last architect has bought real estate in Eureka to encourage economic growth.

At present, these additional metrics of evaluation are more or less anecdotal. The future development of evaluative measures for the Small town Studio's Eureka Project will involve instruments of assessment for all three constituencies.

Looking Forward

Investing more effort in evaluating engaged, service-learning, live university-community projects is certainly warranted, particularly considering the effort such projects demand. This paper has begun to consider the ramifications of such projects on the community they purport to serve – namely, the community stakeholders of Eureka, Kansas. A survey instrument has been tested, but requires some fine-tuning, and additional methods of measuring success are needed for results to be correlated. This focus, and the results rendered, will be utilized to calibrate future efforts in engaging with the town of Eureka and other small towns in Kansas.

References

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[6] See for example Lambright & Alden ("Voices from the Trenches "Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, Volume 16, Number 2, p. 9, 2012), Canizaro ("Design-Build in Architectural Education" in the International Journal of Architectural Research Volume 6 - Issue 3 - November 2012) and Gail Treschel's book *Samuel Mockbee and the Rural Studio: Community Architecture* (Birmingham Museum of Art, 2003).
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