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Melissa A. Patricio
Roger Williams University

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Urban design studio partners with Fall River on City Pier Redevelopment Project via CPC



December 21, 2015 | Melissa A. Patricio

FALL RIVER, MASS. – Set on the eastern bank of Mount Hope Bay and the mouth of the Taunton River, the City of Fall River owes much of its rich history to the water. For generations the mill city served as America’s leading textile manufacturer, powered by the Quequechan River.

That was more than a century ago. Fall River’s mighty manufacturing industry fell victim to the Great Depression and – despite valiant efforts to refashion itself with a garment industry that lasted into the 1990s – the city has struggled to reclaim its legacy as an economic beacon. But Fall River’s motto, “We’ll Try,” continues to buoy revitalization efforts and city officials are once again looking to the water to redevelop the City Pier, calling on their neighbors across the Bay – Roger Williams University architecture students – to provide plans for a potential ferry terminal on Davol Street.

Working with city planner Bill Kenney, students from Associate Professor Robert Dermody’s architecture studio spent the fall semester performing site analyses, studying ferries, researching the history of the Fall River Line – a ferry that provided transport to New York City until 1937 – and creating designs for a contemporary ferry terminal. Earlier this month, 11 students were met with resounding praise as they showcased their ideas for government officials and members of the public at City Hall.

Kenney, who had just stepped into his role as city planner when the Community Partnerships Center reached out with a call for project proposals late last summer, called the students' work "striking," joking that, "my job is in jeopardy because of the quality of the work that's been displayed here."

"Part of a city planner's job is to dream, and to think about what might be and what could happen – not only on the waterfront, but throughout the city. And having the students come here and think out of the box in sometimes nontraditional ways helps that process along. I'm very grateful for that," Kenney said.

The city pier redevelopment project dates back to 1982 when Fall River acquired the property by eminent domain – more than a decade before the student architects were even born. Hazardous waste issues that are now close to remediation have plagued the project and prevented development of the area.

"This project was a wonderful challenge architecturally and a wonderful training tool because it's a real site that we were able to visit – we can almost see it from our campus," Dermody said. "It's an urban, highly technical and very dynamic project rife with transportation issues, circulation issues, needing to address the flood plain. A ferry terminal is fascinating – there's lots of coming and going, and you have to account for how you accommodate that in your design."

Working with a client – in this case, Kenney representing Fall River – made the project more real, Dermody said.

"It's not just the students in studio with a blank sheet of paper. They're responding to the site, the history, the user and how it might be built. It's a very real project in that sense," Dermody said. And though the designs are likely to remain concepts, what the students are really providing is vision. "They may never build it there, but it can inspire the people who make the decisions. The students open their eyes to possibility, and the partner opened the students' eyes to the realities of a project like this."

Working with a client was a new experience for many of the students, and a critical one in preparing them for the profession.

"Working with the project partner really helped us to focus on fitting the design in the context of the city of Fall River," said senior Jake Schmidt, whose design featured repetitive elements to invoke a feeling of constant movement and a main building supported with large wooden "ribs" that invoke images of a ship's hull. "Mr. Kenney would ask questions that wouldn't naturally come up in studio and could specify what the city needs."

Sarah Gilloran agreed: "It gives you much more of a real perspective, especially when that's what we'll be doing in the future. It makes a big difference."

The benefit of the partnership is "real talk," said senior Taylor Messier. "Bill is the voice of the city and could tell us what Fall River really needs."

“It’s a critical piece of the waterfront puzzle,” Kenney said. “This waterfront was designed and conceived to be a continuous program from the Battleship Cove area all the way up to the new Veterans Memorial Bridge, and this is like a missing tooth – a gaping hole – in that process. This project has great potential to serve not only those who live in the city but visitors alike.”

The student designs have been turned over to the [City of Fall River](#) for future use as city officials continue to promote the City Pier project. In the meantime, the partnership was so successful, Kenney said, that he will again partner with the School of Architecture during the spring semester on rehabilitation plans for Old Second Street, a bricked pedestrian walkway that will serve as a site for arts and culture programming via the Art, History and Architecture group [AHA! Fall River](#).