
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE-LEARNING RECIPROCITY

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ABSTRACT

As part of the University of Oklahoma's Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture, the Urban Design Studio prepares graduate students from diverse backgrounds in its Master of Urban Design program to practice as urban design professionals. The studio uses a reciprocal community engagement and service-learning approach that benefits cities and residents of Oklahoma and provides students with meaningful educational experiences. Four case studies of studio projects are considered here. Each case study focuses on a different type of project, including creative urban design practice, participatory action research, community-based planning, and real-life, real-time placemaking. The studio regularly collaborates with communities on urban design studies and interventions. One such project focused on the revitalization of a three-mile stretch of Route 66 running through the heart of Tulsa. Participatory action research is represented by Tulsa Photovoice, an example of how studio faculty and students collaborate with communities to discover knowledge. Working in a more traditional framework, studio students led a community-based planning process for the downtown plan of the city of Muskogee, Oklahoma, entitled a Landscape of Hope. Finally, placemaking activities like the one for the Chapman Green illustrate how students learn by making. Each case study explains how the project was initiated, what community engagement techniques were used, and how students participated. Project outcomes are also summarized.

Keywords: Case Study, Community Engagement, Photovoice, Placemaking, Urban Design, Service-Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

With over half of Earth's 7.63 billion inhabitants now living in cities, the design of urban areas, particularly their public space, is an ever-increasing need for human safety, utility, and comfort (United Nations 2019, 9). Urban design should not be viewed as a separate discipline, but as an intersection of disciplines involved in the design, building, and management of cities. This intersection includes not only the design professions of architecture, landscape architecture, and civil engineering but also city planning, real estate development, construction, public administration, and many others (Figure 1). The vision of the University of Oklahoma Urban Design Studio is to create a community of urban designers speaking a common language to work together at this disciplinary intersection to improve the quality of life for Oklahomans and city dwellers everywhere.



Figure 1: Urban design disciplines



Figure 2: Reciprocal model

(Figures by author)

We believe that the best way for urban design graduate students to learn is to gain practical experience by tackling urban issues with community partners in a realistic setting. To facilitate this approach, the Urban Design Studio uses a reciprocal community engagement and service-learning model (Figure 2). Based on a model described by Michael Rios for evaluating community-based design, this method asks community partners to provide community engagement and learning opportunities for students in exchange for technical assistance, capacity building, or policy and decision-making support (Rios 2006, 52). The exact nature of each partnership depends on the goals of the project as expressed by the community partners. While most projects have a primary community partner, interventions in urban environments, systems, and organizations require engagement with multiple stakeholders, partners, and communities. We follow the cardinal rule of placemaking that the community is the expert (Project for Public Spaces 2000, 35). The inhabitants of the communities we engage with know the most about the environments where they live, work, and play. Community partners must be open to collaboration with these constituencies and other partners so students are exposed to the trade-offs required in design. Their work must reflect consideration for multiple points-of-view.

To elucidate how this reciprocal model works, four case studies of Urban Design Studio projects will be examined. The case studies represent four different types of projects, including creative urban design practice, participatory research, community-based planning, and placemaking. Each case study begins by describing how the studio was engaged by the primary community partner, and introduces other stakeholders involved in the project. The different engagement techniques used in the project are then outlined, followed by a description of how students were involved throughout the process. Lastly, outcomes and impacts of each project are discussed.

2. URBAN DESIGN: ROUTE 66—A STRING OF PEARLS

2.1 Community Partners

Like many Urban Design Studio efforts, this project was requested by a community partner. In this case, former Oklahoma state legislator Russ Roach, a tireless advocate for urban redevelopment and a devoted Route 66 fanatic, asked the studio to explore urban design alternatives along a portion of Tulsa's Route 66, known locally as 11th Street. The project focuses on a three-mile segment of 11th Street, starting at the edge of downtown and stretching east to Yale Avenue.

A common element of our urban design projects is to engage diverse viewpoints to guide the students in their work. An effective way to do this is to empanel a steering committee to meet regularly with the students and one another. In this case, the panel consisted of Panel Chair, Hon. Russ Roach; the Community Development director of the University of Tulsa; the Business Development and Inclusion Officer from Bama Pie Corporation; the District 4 City Councilor; the Director of Planning for the city of Tulsa; Michael Wallis, a renowned author and historian; and Kevin Anderson, a commercial real estate broker and Urban Design Studio adjunct faculty member.

The committee quickly settled on project goals. First, create an authentic cultural experience, a challenge for an area famous for kitschy folk art. Second, integrate disengaged institutions into the streetscape by removing barriers and wrapping blank walls. Third, strengthen weak nodes at intersections, encourage transit-oriented development by rehabilitating historic buildings, and add new moderate density mixed-use development on vacant lots. Lastly, redesign the street, incorporating complete street principles and using road diets.

2.2 Engagement Techniques

The steering committee formed a foundation for engagement with its many community connections with stakeholders. They met monthly to review project progress and to guide the students' efforts. The students supported the committee by preparing agendas, running the meetings, preparing materials, and keeping meeting minutes—all useful skills for their future professional practice.

To reach citizens and property owners along the corridor, students conducted asset mapping sessions, like the one conducted at the historic Campbell Hotel. The students created an eighty-foot-long map with accompanying photographs. Students asked participants to use Post-It Notes to enumerate assets and identify opportunities. The event was held in a festive environment with hors d'oeuvres, a cash bar, and music. This setting attracted more participants than would be expected at a typical town hall meeting. Many lingered and had deep discussions with the students and steering committee. One of the surprising findings was how resident reactions differed depending on how they were asked about the image of the street. If you refer to the street as Route 66, the image described is positive, kitschy, and nostalgic. If you refer to it as 11th Street, the image described is negative, rundown, even unsafe. The irony is, this is the same public space being described, sometimes by the same individual. It may seem like semantics, but this type of contradiction may expose differences between different groups of individuals. Although we did not see a correlation in this case between different groups based on geographic location, race, age, or ethnic group, asking the same question in different ways can be a useful technique.

The city of Tulsa was also beginning to rehabilitate the street using its newly adopted Complete Streets policy and guidelines. The students received a grant from Tulsa's transportation planning organization, the Indian Nations Council of Governments (INCOG), to design and host a Complete Streets workshop. Aimed primarily at city of Tulsa planners, civil engineers, public works officials, and their consultants, the workshop was designed to engage them in the many issues of streetscape design. The workshop featured the urbanist Gil Peñalosa from 8 80 Cities, who led a walking tour and gave a public lecture that attracted an audience of more than sixty. The urban design students created several Complete Streets models for the next portion of the workshop. The models consisted of design elements representing a variety of street lane configurations, parking, buildings, and street furniture. Participants were split into teams that collaborated on design schemes for Route 66 (Figure 3). Each team shared their results with the entire group at the end of the workshop for discussion and critique.



Figure 3: Complete Streets workshop (Photograph by author)

2.3 Student Involvement

Early on, while performing research and analysis, the urban design students came to the counterintuitive conclusion that the main intersections along 11th Street were weak nodes. Where you would expect high real estate values and intense use, there were instead vacant lots and blank walls. The students decided to stage a design competition to host teams of architecture and landscape architecture students from the college's main campus in Norman to develop design alternatives. They wrote a competition brief with design objectives and rules for the multidisciplinary teams to follow. The Signage Foundation, Inc., signed on as the competition sponsor and brought an interesting new aspect to the competition program by asking students to design commercial signs for the corridor.

The urban design students then organized the competition. The first step was to bring the Norman-based student teams to Tulsa to visit their intersections. When the students arrived in Tulsa, they were randomly divided into seven teams, one team for each major intersection. They were treated to lunch at the Tulsa Historical Society, where they heard stories from Representative Roach, Cyrus Stevens Avery II, and Michael Wallis. A Tulsa

Transit bus then took the teams to their designated sites for walking tours, sketching, and informal interviewing.

Once back at their studios, the teams had two weeks to create and present their visions in written, visual, and model form. A jury of design professionals, chaired by Wade Swormstedt, editor of *Signs of the Times* magazine, provided critiques and awarded scholarship prizes to the winning team.

2.4 Outcomes and Impacts

After the completion of judging, all the entries were displayed at a public exhibit hosted by the Urban Design Studio and the Lobeck-Taylor Foundation at the Numbered Car Building near the intersection of 11th Street and Lewis Avenue. Models of each intersection were displayed on the large-scale map. Bill Lobeck's vintage car collection provided a stunning backdrop for the over three hundred visitors who attended opening night. By coincidence, the winning design focused on this intersection. The design team proposed that the Tulsa Farmers' Market relocate here from their Cherry Street location. While that did not happen, the Lobeck-Taylor Foundation subsequently renovated the Tulsa Produce Market and opened the Mother Road Market and Kitchen 66, Tulsa's first food hall. It has been a smashing success, catalyzing new development and rehabilitations nearby.

Some of the students commented on how they realized that the connection between private buildings as containers of space and the public place of the street come together to create urban design. The ambiguity of the signs they designed in that space challenged many of their perspectives on what is architecture and what is landscape architecture. The innovative signage created by the design teams also attracted the attention of Councilor Ewing and the City of Tulsa Planning Department, leading to a signage overlay district. Believe it or not, the city's sign code did not allow the alluring neon and kinetic signs that helped make Route 66 famous.

3. PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH: TULSA PHOTOVOICE

3.1 Community Partners

One of the things that makes the Urban Design Studio unique is its location at OU-Tulsa with health sciences programs that do not exist at the main campus. The School of Community Medicine has been innovative in focusing its programs on community health outcomes and reducing health disparities in the state. A feature of their curriculum is the annual Summer Institute, bringing together faculty and students to take a deep dive into the communities they practice in. From the start, twelve years ago, the Summer Institute has included students and faculty from all programs, not just the health sciences. The Urban Design Studio has been involved from the beginning. At the first institutes, small student and faculty groups visited healthcare offices, nonprofit organizations, and community institutions to interview executives and providers. It soon became apparent that a resident or patient perspective was needed to balance the other perspectives. The studio was thrilled when it was asked by the School of Community Medicine to lead an effort with faculty from the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work to develop a community-based action research project for the Summer Institute.

One of the first questions to answer was how to identify which residents to interview. It was desirable to have residents from a variety of backgrounds who were geographically

distributed throughout the city. A chance conversation with leadership from the Tulsa Community Service Council led to an ideal solution. The Council's Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative (TACSI) assisted fourteen Tulsa Public and Union Public Schools to become community schools. As community schools, they are hubs of their neighborhoods. The schools were geographically dispersed as desired. Furthermore, TACSI places site coordinators at each school who are trusted by parents and residents. The site coordinators were ideal research partners for us to recruit as participants for the Summer Institute interviews.

3.2 Engagement Techniques

We chose a powerful technique known as photovoice for our study. Photovoice is a community-based action research method based on the axiom that the community is the expert (Wang et al. 2004, 911). Four residents at each community school were recruited to take photographs of their built environments and daily routines (Figure 4). They received digital cameras as an incentive to participate. The urban design students collected the photos and mounted them on photo tiles provided to the interview teams from the Summer Institute. The interview teams were trained in appreciative inquiry before interviewing the participants at the schools. All fifty-three participants who submitted photos arrived for their scheduled ninety-minute interviews. All the interviews were conducted on the same evening simultaneously at the school sites with researchers and the TACSI coordinators present. The interviews were recorded, and participants were asked to write captions for all their photos.

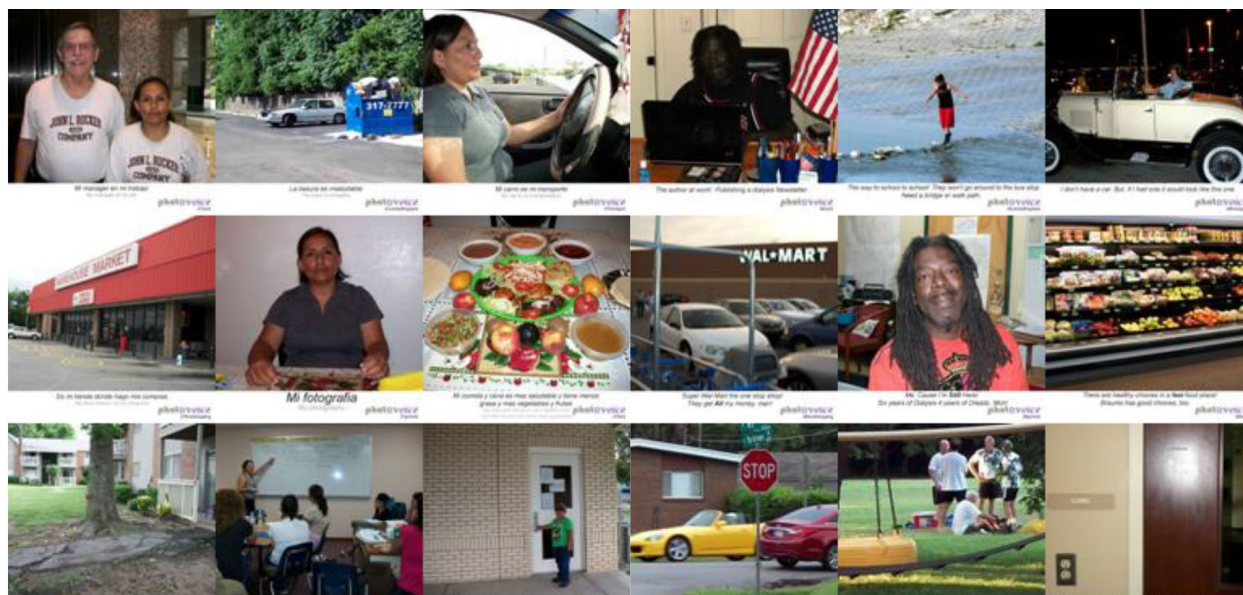


Figure 4: Gallery of Tulsa photovoice tiles (Photograph by author)

3.3 Student Involvement

Students from the Urban Design Studio and the School of Social Work were involved in every aspect of the study's design and implementation. They devised the research protocol and protections for participants. They also trained the TACSI site coordinators how to recruit and instruct participants taking photos. They developed a curriculum for appreciative inquiry that

was used to train faculty and student interview teams. They collected and processed the photos, recordings, and written notes. Finally, they organized a public exhibit with over seven hundred photographs at the Summer Institute.

After the completion of the institute, the students anchored an effort to analyze the data using qualitative analysis. A two-day workshop with faculty, arranging and rearranging photo tiles, led to a coding key to be used to classify the photos and interview transcripts. Each transcript was coded twice using the NVivo software package. The coding results were checked for inter-rater reliability. The results of the analysis became a technical research report that led to several scholarly publications and conference presentations.

3.4 Outcomes and Impacts

The Tulsa Photovoice project succeeded in providing an in-depth view into the lives of residents for the 140-plus students and faculty attending the Summer Institute. Many commented on their emotional responses to the interview sessions. Others demonstrated a better understanding of the lives of patients. Almost all were appreciative of the experience. A surprising outcome was the reaction of some of the medical faculty, many of whom had become accustomed to only interviewing sick patients in short encounters in their exam rooms. The students involved tended not to be affected by these biases and actually became model interviewers for the more seasoned faculty.

Perhaps even more meaningful were the reactions of the community participants. They were invited to the appreciation luncheon at the conclusion of the Summer Institute. The luncheon also served as the opening of the Photovoice Exhibit. Despite having to take time off from work and travel to the university, almost every participant came, and they brought their entire families! They were extremely proud of their contributions to the exhibit. Many had us take their pictures in front of their photo tiles, and many wanted photographs with the students and researchers, as well. Even more impressive were the comments we heard from the TACSI coordinators that the photovoice participants had gained confidence and were becoming involved in the activities at the schools. Some who had been invisible for years started coming more frequently and were taking leadership roles.

4. COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING: DOWNTOWN MUSKOGEE—A LANDSCAPE OF HOPE

4.1 Community Partners

The architect Matt King's love of old buildings led him to Muskogee in search of historic preservation and rehabilitation projects that might be funded with tax credits. He found a once-grand downtown desperately in need of revitalization. The city planner, Gary Garvin, said the city had just completed updating its comprehensive plan and was looking for an urban design master plan for the downtown. As a friend and supporter of the Urban Design Studio, King arranged a meeting with Garvin and city manager Mike Miller. The Urban Design Studio was soon engaged as a community planner. Because this was a large-scale project, OU's Institute for Quality Communities, or IQC, became an equal partner.

A steering committee was formed. Former Muskogee mayor Wren Stratton chaired the group that included elected officials, downtown business leaders, members of the Muskogee Community Foundation, community activists, journalists, and city staff from Economic Development, Parks, Public Works, and the Planning Departments. Frank Cooper,

the manager of the struggling Arrowhead Mall, also joined the group and became a significant partner as the project unfolded.

4.2 Engagement Techniques

The urban design students were thrust into the project on the first day of class when they traveled to Muskogee to staff a booth at the Muskogee Farmers' Market. Students visited the market several times during its fall season to engage market vendors and customers. As the market is centrally located in the parking lot of the Muskogee Civic Center, many customers walked to it from downtown apartments or homes in adjoining neighborhoods.

Preliminary findings from the sessions at the market and work with the steering committee resulted in the decision to host a planning workshop at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center (Figure 5). Over one hundred community members attended the event, which was structured as an open house, complete with a barbeque dinner. Participants provided feedback in a variety of ways. A thirty-foot-long wallpaper collected over three hundred written comments. Students from the IQC constructed a scale model of downtown that let participants develop future scenarios as part of a design game.

The workshop was open to all Muskogee residents and notably attracted a number of African American and Native American participants, two groups that represent a significant proportion of the population of neighborhoods near downtown. The Martin Luther King Jr. Center has a robust after-school program for children in the area, and its choice as a venue helped attract workshop participants, as it was a familiar and trusted community institution. The community comments from the workshop were sorted into categories by the faculty and students. Many of the workshop participants remembered a more vibrant downtown with many more options for housing, shopping, and entertainment. But they also reflected on the effects of segregation and the erasures caused by urban renewal. These recollections led to the community's five goals: increase downtown activity, make better connections, restore historic buildings, introduce green spaces, and revitalize or reimagine the downtown shopping mall.



Figure 5: Planning workshop at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center (Photograph by author)

The workshop was also used to launch the Muskogee Collective Hope Survey. The survey was developed with the help of Chan Hellman, a professor of social work at the OU-Tulsa Hope Research Center. Hellman's work revolves around the cognitive psychology of hope. He defines hope as “the belief that your future can be brighter and better than your past and that you actually have a role to play to make it better” (Gwinn and Hellman 2019, 9). C. R. Snyder's theory elaborates further to explain that hope consists of three elements: goals, pathways, and agency (Snyder 2000, 9–10). The Muskogee Collective Hope Survey aimed to measure hopefulness in Muskogee. It also examined the support for the project goals developed at the workshop and the level of trust of local officials. The survey was used by the planning team to develop pathways and identify agents to implement the plan.

4.3 Student Involvement

The goal to revitalize Arrowhead Mall became one of the most pressing needs identified in the engagement efforts. Built in the early 1980s as part of an urban renewal project from another downtown plan, the property struggled to keep tenants and compete with newer big-box development along the Shawnee Bypass on the outskirts of town. As for the Route 66 project discussed earlier, the Urban Design Studio students decided a design competition could be a vehicle to explore pathways to transform the mall.

Four teams consisting of architecture, landscape architecture, and interior design students started the competition with a daylong visit to Muskogee that included a tour of the mall, a strategy meeting with mall management, and a treasure hunt downtown. They received guidance from guest lecturer Ellen Dunham-Jones, director of the Urban Design Program at Georgia Tech and a leading expert on retrofitting malls. Students learned about three frameworks for mall conversions: adaptive re-use and retrofit, replacement by new urban fabric, and reversion to a nature state. Dunham-Jones also chaired a professional jury that included Matt King; Ron Drake, author of *Flip This Town*; the landscape architect Tim Presley; Cristan Robertson, marketing director for Arrowhead Mall; and Johni Wardwell, representing the Muskogee Community Foundation.

4.4 Outcomes and Impacts

As part of an official planning process for the city of Muskogee, the most important outcome was to produce a document to guide future downtown development. The plan was adopted unanimously by both the Planning Commission and the City Council. At the same council meeting where the plan was adopted, the City Council accepted a \$1 million gift from the Muskogee Community Foundation to establish the downtown improvement grant program recommended in the plan. As of this writing, all the funds have been allocated and tangible results are visible along Main Street, Broadway Street, and in the Depot District, where construction of the Depot Green has begun. Changes are also happening at the Arrowhead Mall, where the main post office has relocated to an empty anchor store location.

The success of the project has also led to additional work for the Urban Design Studio and Institute for Quality Communities. We recently completed the Muskogee Comprehensive Housing Analysis and are currently working to create a Community Pattern Book for the Founders' Place Historic District.

5. PLACEMAKING: CHAPMAN GREEN

5.1 Community Partners

One day Bob Sober walked into the Urban Design Studio and said, “Hi, I am from the Urban Core Art Project, and I have a project I think would be perfect for your students.” The Urban Core Art Project (UCAP) is an ad hoc group of current and former Tulsa arts commissioners. Their mission was to bring temporary, interactive art installations to downtown Tulsa. They had completed several successful but small public art works, and now had an Art Works grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for a much more ambitious project. They had commissioned the internationally acclaimed artist Patrick Dougherty to build one of his *Stickwork* sculptures in the Chapman Green (Dougherty 2010, 17).

The Chapman Green is a one-acre park located in the core of downtown's Art Deco district. It was built in 2007 for the Oklahoma Centennial, but funds were inadequate to complete all the envisioned improvements. The park was subsequently underused. UCAP saw their work as an opportunity to activate the park and catalyze street life in the area. As we discussed the concept of placemaking as an incremental process during which the community undertook its own design and construction, the UCAP Team became excited and asked, “How do we start the placemaking process?”

Recognizing that the first step is to identify stakeholders and interested parties, UCAP and the Urban Design Studio began a stakeholder discovery process that would eventually engage a multitude, including the City of Tulsa Parks Department, Tulsa Parks Friends, Up with Trees, Tulsa International Mayfest, Land Legacy, the University of Tulsa School of Art, the Deco District, Meridia Development, Price Family Properties, Garden Deva, Project for Public Spaces, the H. A. Chapman Foundation, TYPROS Foundation, Art Alley, Kitchen 66, and others.

5.2 Engagement Techniques

The urban design students once again led the way by conducting regular stakeholder meetings and workshops. They borrowed a technique from Candy Chang called *I Wish This Was* (Chang 2010). Students posted stickers in the lobbies of apartment buildings and restaurants near the Green, asking residents and diners to share their visions for the park. Results from the stickers filled out by residents indicated a need for shade, places to sit, and better accommodations for dogs. There was also a desire for activities in the park, including exercise classes, live music, movies, and festivals. It was quickly recognized that the need to accommodate dogs, particularly their biological needs of elimination were in direct conflict with the desire for activities using the same grassy lawn. The introduction of new residents in rehabilitated office buildings around the park was driving both trends, something we might have missed without the feedback from the apartment dwellers. The director of Tulsa Parks and her staff provided expertise to propose doggie go-zones based on designs found at airports and other areas with limited green space. These designs were then modeled on a scale model that was easy to manipulate, so that stakeholders could test these and other design interventions quickly during the ideation phase.

5.3 Student Involvement

In addition to coordinating the engagement activities, the students were busy assisting UCAP with the *Stickwork* sculpture. Not only did they work directly with the artist to build the

sculpture, but they also recruited and scheduled over one hundred community volunteers to help with the construction (Figure 6). They got their feet wet in organizing and managing an event by hosting a Picnic in the Park with live music, food trucks, and art activities. Learning that management is at least as important as design, the students set out to write a grant to fund park programming. The H. A. Chapman Foundation Trust granted their request, providing funds to Tulsa International Mayfest for a series of activities and festivals on the Green.



Figure 6: Students and community volunteers with the artist Patrick Dougherty and members of the Urban Core Art Project in front of *Prairie Schooners* (*Prairie Schooners* is a work created by the artist Patrick Dougherty with the help of community volunteers. It was sponsored by the Urban Core Art Project and funded by a National Endowment for the Arts Design Works Research Grant. Photograph by author.)

The students also conducted field research using direct observation and time-lapse video cameras to record park usage before, during, and after the park interventions. Their results formed the basis of the evaluation report for the National Endowment for the Arts. Thanks to the generosity of UCAP, the students were also able to travel to St. Louis to survey public art by visiting the City Museum, Citygarden, Souldard Market, and Laumeier Sculpture Park. The trip to St. Louis exposed the students to what a program of public art can do to transform a city and expanded their thinking beyond the focus of one site and one sculpture.

5.4 Outcomes and Impacts

The opening of the *Stickwork* sculpture dubbed *Prairie Schooners* by the artist garnered much attention for the park. Park visitors came to see the work and walk through it. Other artists photographed and painted it. UCAP did not rest on its laurels but immediately commissioned another sculpture, *Be the One*, conceived by faculty at the University of Tulsa School of Art and executed by the local artist Chris Morphis at Garden Deva. Other artwork was installed across the street at Art Alley, spearheaded by the studio alumna Kelly Cook and the restaurateur Libby Billings with a grant from the TYPROS Foundation. TYPROS followed up by hosting their annual tactical urbanism event, StreetCred, at Art Alley.

Events staged by Tulsa Mayfest have also been highly successful. As another local art organization with experience staging the annual Mayfest celebrations, they are a perfect strategic partner. They have hosted numerous events at the Green in the last year, including the Fairy Festival. One unanticipated impact was the adoption of the park by the fairies who kept showing up at subsequent unrelated events. Students also became deeply attached to the park, with two of the students actually finding a residence across the street.

6. CONCLUSION

The case studies presented here demonstrate how a reciprocal approach can successfully meet student learning objectives while creating significant community impact. Student reflections and assessments from these projects indicate that the students acquired knowledge, obtained skills, and developed values, helping them grow as urban design professionals. Specific learning outcomes noted in student reflections include increased knowledge of urban structures and frameworks, appreciation of cultural heritage, and a better understanding of the use of implementation methods by planners and policymakers. They also demonstrated increased skill using urban design analytics, improved three-dimensional creativity, and higher levels of confidence and agency. Urban Design Studio graduates consistently report in alumni surveys that they use what they learned at the studio every day in their firms and offices.

Community partners also report benefits from the technical assistance, capacity building, and policy support received from these projects. The projects led by students have been rated to be of as high a quality as those performed by professional consulting firms. Furthermore, community residents have shown great enthusiasm for the students' work and higher levels of trust of officials willing to work in an open collaborative partnership where many viewpoints are presented and respected.

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