

The Traditional Non-Traditional Landscape Architecture Studio: Education Through Service Learning In Miami, OK

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ABSTRACT

This research will illustrate the importance of a recent service learning project that was conducted for Miami, Oklahoma, by landscape architecture graduate students and faculty of the University of Oklahoma. Students and faculty partnered with the community to form the studio design team. Education in the landscape architecture studio at the graduate level provides an excellent opportunity to engage communities through service learning projects. Service learning is a unique, dynamic, and powerful framework for student learning and landscape architecture is a diverse profession which requires a multi-faceted educational approach, including community based outreach projects. Miami, Oklahoma, was the site of a recent community outreach project where service learning provided the basic framework for this course. For the duration of an entire semester, students and faculty became entrenched in the community. The service learning project included an initial site visit for students to meet city staff that served as the community contacts for the project. Additionally, the studio design team made other site visits/ trips to Miami to present the findings throughout the project to the mayor, city council, and interested citizens. Throughout the project, the product that the design team produced and presented to the community was two-fold. First, written reports were created that described the ideas behind the design, and secondly, traditional designs, in graphic form, were produced, illustrating the ideas of the project further. At the conclusion of the project, the studio design team presented the city with a final report that detailed the entire project process throughout the semester. This report serves not only as a written record of the project, but it also will assist the city in increasing support for the projects and programs that were illustrated by the design team so that the city can become more competitive as they seek state and federal funding for the projects. This research proves that service learning is not only beneficial to the students and faculty teams that work on the projects, but that these projects also offer a tangible asset to the community, strengthening the community from within.

Keywords: Landscape architecture, service learning, design education, applied research, community outreach, community engagement

WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

*S*ervice learning assists student learning as it provides a multi-faceted educational approach as it relates to knowledge of the discipline, encourages academic engagement, fosters civil knowledge, and civil engagement. Service learning is also a very important tool for student education as research has shown that students “participating in service learning courses are more engaged in the classroom experience and that they had an increased sense of personal efficacy, an increased awareness of the world and of their own personal values” (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Service learning has been defined as “a credit bearing education experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs in such a way to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation for the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). Research findings have also shown that students participating in a service learning course are more connected to the world around them and they also have a sense of personal values (Astin, et al., 2000).

The University of Oklahoma Program for Instruction Innovation has also defined service learning with the following model (Figure 1) as connections between disciplinary knowledge and civic knowledge assisted by academic engagement and civic engagement, all made possible through service learning activities.

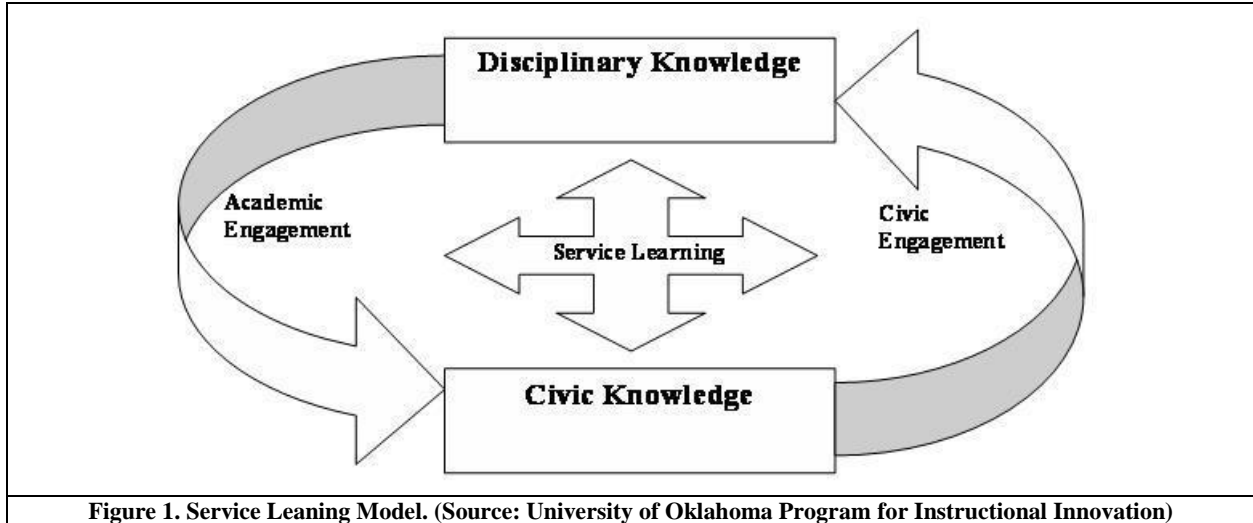


Figure 1. Service Learning Model. (Source: University of Oklahoma Program for Instructional Innovation)

IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE LEARNING IN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Service learning as an instructional technique in landscape architectural education is a natural fit. Not only does service learning provide a well rounded educational opportunity, but it also allows for a multi-disciplinary approach to education. Landscape architecture is a profession that incorporates many other disciplines and professions and as such there are many educational aspects to it. For example, landscape architects can specialize in plants, ecology, urban design, construction materials, presentation techniques, etc. Due to this fact, working with a service learning approach allows for a well rounded educational opportunity as most service learning projects that engage communities evolve throughout the project as the scope of work becomes more defined and changes slightly.

Additionally, landscape architects never practice in the solitary bubble of just their discipline. There are always outside consultants that bring landscape architects into their projects or are brought into projects by the landscape architect. Because of this, it is pivotal in the education of future landscape architects that they are exposed to working in multi-disciplinary teams. This is also a great opportunity for faculty to collaborate with colleagues in through applied research.

WHY DOES SERVICE LEARNING WORK SO WELL FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION?

Primarily, service learning and the ideals of such an educational technique lends itself very well for instruction in landscape architecture because of the importance of studio work within the profession. Almost all design fields use the studio environment to disseminate information. The studio environment provides students with the ability to interact with professors and classmates in a collaborative setting. As opposed to traditional classroom teaching in which a professor lectures to a group of students and the information is flowing in one direction, a studio setting allows for transfer of knowledge throughout the studio participants; students and faculty. In addition, in landscape architecture as with many design professions, the process of design is a time consuming endeavor in which the cyclical approach to designing and redesigning is important. This process of back and forth is best attained in a studio setting where peers are present to assist in impromptu critiques.

Secondly, landscape architecture is a professional degree and as such it provides excellent opportunities to apply the classroom instruction in a real world setting. This applied approach to instruction not only strengthens the students' retention of the material, but it continues to engage the students throughout the duration of the project. This connection exists not only between the student and the material, but also between the students and the community that they are working with. It is through this type of outreach that useful and meaningful service learning can take place.

Lastly, students that work with communities tend to share a great connection to those communities. Many students that worked on the Miami, OK service learning project have kept in touch with the community after the completion of the project and continue to keep track of the implementation of their project. Student connections to communities not only exists to the community that was initially engaged but this connection also extrapolates itself to other communities later in students' professional careers. Even landscape architects that practice in private firms and organizations must understand the people that they are designing for. This connection to the people is one of the more fulfilling aspects of the profession and one that continues to develop throughout professional careers. Many landscape architects also donate their expertise and services as a way to give back to communities. Service learning and outreach projects are also on the leading edge of alternative classroom instructional techniques and many universities throughout the United States are urging instruction in such innovative manners.

SERVICE LEARNING IN MIAMI, OKLAHOMA

This service learning project took place in the northeast Oklahoma city of Miami in the spring semester of 2008 but the planning and organization of the project began long before that. In early 2007, a representative from the city of Miami, Oklahoma Scenic Byways, and the professor of this course (Professor Loon) met in Norman, OK to discuss the possibility of collaborating to assist this community in need. Discussions focused on how the design team would be able to assist the community. In the pre-project evaluation, a needs assessment was produced (see appendix 1), studied, and analyzed to determine how the city of Miami would benefit from a partnership with the Division of Landscape Architecture in the College of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma. It was through this needs assessment that Oklahoma Scenic Byways and the Division of Landscape Architecture decided that assisting the city of Miami would be beneficial for all involved. Additionally, Oklahoma Scenic Byways was gracious enough to provide the necessary funding that would offset the expenses incurred by the studio design team based on the myriad of financial hardships that the city of Miami faced.

Following that meeting, Professor Loon went to the city to Miami in the summer of 2007 to meet with city officials and tour the project site. It was also decided that the project site would include a six block area of Main Street in historic downtown Miami. Here, Main Street is also Route 66 and as such holds significant cultural significance as it is the destination for many travelers through the area. In addition, the city of Miami owned and maintained parking lots that were adjacent to Main Street and these parking lots would be instituted into the overall design of the project. One of the main challenges of this project was to solve the pedestrian and vehicular circulation issues from these parking lots to businesses on Main Street. Additionally, there was one property on Main Street, owned by the city that presented itself very well for a pocket park allowing for multiple design solutions.

This project was incorporated into the fourth design course that graduate students of landscape architecture take at the University of Oklahoma. The course, LA 5545 Landscape Architecture Intermediate Graduate Studio IV, is a design course that focuses on the urban setting and urban environment. Prior to this point in the curriculum, landscape architecture students have taken three design courses ranging from basic design to housing/ subdivision design to park design and have established a solid foundation of technical skills ranging from plant material knowledge to material construction techniques. For those reasons, this course presents itself as an opportune time in the education of a graduate student to take on a complex service learning course.

The Division of Landscape Architecture is home to the Center for Community Based Projects (CCBP) which honors the missions of both the University of Oklahoma and the College of Architecture while further addressing the enhancement of student education, contributing to public education, providing technical assistance where required or appropriate, and providing opportunities of applied research for students and faculty. Through the framework of the CCBP students deal with various areas relating to the following: highly urbanized areas, main

street and neighborhood revitalization, community design and planning, growth management, economic development, environmental impact analysis, commercial strip enhancement, park and open space planning, climate analysis and amelioration, and historic preservation of cultural landscapes. Service learning projects have been incorporated into the CCBP and the curriculum of the Division of Landscape Architecture for many years and for various communities throughout the state of Oklahoma.

SITE INVENTORY AND ANALYSIS

The studio design team which consisted of six graduate students and one faculty member went to visit the city of Miami early in the spring semester of 2008. The purpose of this trip was to gather data in the form of photographs, on site measurements, and overall impressions of the community. Students were divided into three groups to produce a site inventory and analysis in their study of the residential, commercial, and park areas of the city. The purpose of this first exercise was for the students to understand urban design and realize that there are various scales at which urban design exists. These are the specific site, the neighborhood (or district), natural and built corridors, cities, and finally, the region.

The methodology for this first exercise included the task of answering the following questions within each group; how do you measure the success of a development? Why are some developments more successful than others? What is interesting about your area? What is the most surprising aspect of your area? What is a “success” in your area? And what is a “failure” or lost opportunity in your area? Additionally, students were asked to successfully complete the following; analysis of historical data, collection of photographic information, review and analysis of the city of Miami code of ordinances, review and analysis of Smart Codes and Smart Growth, review of a similar recent development in the United States, and production of character sketches relating to the area of the city that was being studied in order to show possibilities for development of those areas. Essentially, student teams we asked to produce a site inventory and analysis, a comparative study comparing Miami to other communities, and the production of character sketches to begin to generate excitement for the project from the community. This exercise was evaluation base on design quality, accuracy/ neatness, thoroughness, graphic quality, and presentation. Student teams were given three and a half weeks to complete this exercise.

At the completion of this first exercise, the studio design team traveled to the city of Miami to present the findings. The purpose of this trip was to establish that data collection and analysis was performed by the design team, but also, it is pivotal to speak with community members and gather data from them firsthand. At this presentation the mayor, city council, interested members of the community, and members of local media were in attendance. The design team presented their initial findings and also participated in many conversations with citizens to better understand the community. It was established from this meeting that the design team was on the right track and that the next phase of the project would begin.

TRAFFIC CALMING

After the studio design team returned from the presentation at the city of Miami, the next phase of the work began. It was decided that due to the many circulation conflicts of pedestrians and vehicles, that design work was needed to address traffic calming. Traffic calming began as a grass roots movement in Europe in the 1960's and slowly it has spread to the United States. The goal of traffic calming is to reduce speed, improve safety, and enhance quality of life through design. Today, many urban areas across the United States are implementing traffic calming measures. These measures include bumps, undulations, speed tables, textured pavements, rumble strips, diagonal diverters, semi diverters, cul de sac closures, chokers, narrowing (of road width), roundabouts, traffic circles, and raised crosswalks to name a few.

The purpose of this exercise was to study urban design relating to the district and natural/ built corridors to understand the impacts that traffic calming can have on a community. The methodology of the project included a thoughtful understanding of the process of designing a traffic calming scheme. It became of utmost importance for the design team to clearly define and establish the stages of the design process so that the final project has a solid base on which to present itself. Defining the problem, collecting data, analysis, design development, and the production of the final design are the main benchmarks that were to be met throughout the design process. The

project boundaries for this exercise were to be defined by each student as part of the inventory and analysis phase of this exercise. Other important elements that students were asked to review were; understanding the approaches and strategies for traffic calming, obtaining typical traffic data (traffic counts, accidents, circulation patterns, etc) for Main Street, reviewing information regarding all transportation options in the area, and locating existing infrastructure and property lines. This exercise was evaluated based on overall design quality, accuracy/ neatness, thoroughness, graphic quality, and the overall presentation of the solution. Students worked on this exercise as individuals and were given four weeks to complete this work.

SITE DESIGN

Prior to a second presentation to the city of Miami, it was also necessary for the studio design team to produce more designs for the community. In previous exercises students studied urban design at different scales in the city of Miami and also examined other cities as part of their observation of precedents. This exercise allowed the students to take all of that knowledge that they had accumulated throughout the semester and produce design recommendations for the historic downtown business district. Their designs could incorporate community parks, residential, and retail areas into the urban fabric of downtown Miami.

The methodology for this exercise was to follow the same process that had been used throughout the semester in generating ideas and designs in a rapid, thoughtful, and prolific manner. As it was clear that the studio design team already knew a considerable amount of information about the Miami community from previous exercises, students were urged to move briskly through the site inventory and analysis phase to get into the schematic design, design development, and final design recommendations portions of this exercise. This exercise was an individual effort that required each student to decide what is most lacking in the urban setting of Miami and present a solution to that problem and to those issues. The exercise was evaluated based on design quality, accuracy/ neatness, thoroughness, graphic quality, and exercise presentation.

At the completion of the traffic calming studies and the site designs that were produced by the studio design team, a second presentation to the community was scheduled. The purpose of the second presentation was to show the community what it was that the design team learned about the community and present possible solutions to the problems that the community faced. This presentation was attended by the mayor, city council, and concerned citizens of the community. While there were many design solutions that were created by the studio design team, it was important to show the community that the solutions created were of varying scales of detail. That is to say that some of the designs could be implemented right away and others were long range solutions for the city.

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The final exercise that the studio design team worked on was the production of the final report and recommendations for the future of Miami. The purpose of this report was to summarize the efforts of the design team throughout the semester. Additionally, the report also assisted students in understanding the sometimes daunting task of collating, organizing, and summarizing work of such incredible detail in a concise document.

The project methodology that was to be used by the students was that each student was to write about their individual design in a manner that would allow it to fit into the final report of the project. Each student was also required to be part of a committee that will assist in the production of the final report. The three committees created were the writing, layout/ design, and image collection committees. The purpose of this was to provide for the most efficient manner of production of such a detailed report. This exercise was evaluated on how well the students worked together, their writing for the various sections of the report, on time production of work, and their presentation of their work.

The final report was produced and multiple copies of the report were sent to the city of Miami. An electronic version of this report was also shared with the city so that it could be posted to the city's website for the community to access at their leisure. The purpose of this report was to show the community what was accomplished over the course of the semester in addition to the fact that the report serves as a visioning document. That is, this report can be used by the community to apply for grants through state and federal organizations. While none of the

designs that were produced by the studio design team are ready for construction because construction documents were not produced (mostly due to liability concerns), these designs show the city the possibilities that are available. If the city was to go and hire a private consulting firm to produce such a report the cost would be astronomical for such a community. In fact, the Oklahoma Department of Transportation (ODOT), which partially funds the Oklahoma Scenic Byways program, has estimated that the work performed by the studio design team would be valued at upwards of \$150,000. This cost would not allow such a small community to accomplish this work, but with the assistance of the studio design team, the city was now the proud owner of a document that could guide them to the future.

COMMUNITY POST PROJECT ASSESSMENT

To understand how successful this service learning project was for the city of Miami, a questionnaire was sent out to the city representative to ascertain the level of significance that this project had for the city and to decipher if the studio design team was successful in accomplishing the goals and objectives for the project. The community was asked to rate from strongly agree to strongly disagree the following statements regarding the enhancement of the graduate students' education as a value added experience versus traditional classroom learning. The following statements were evaluated by the community; graduate students' education has been enhanced working with elected/ appointed officials, graduate students' education has been enhanced working with community groups and members of the client community, graduate students' education has been enhanced by organizing and conducting community workshops, graduate students' education has been enhanced by working with a faculty mentor fulfilling responsibilities of primary investigator, graduate students' education has been enhanced through an in-depth basic research activity that is applied in a "real world" situation, and the graduate students' education has been enhanced through completion of a professional level planning and design document as a "deliverable" to a client community.

Additionally, the community representative was asked to rate the following statements regarding the enhancement of public education and empowerment relative to quality of life issues in the environments they inhabit. The following statements were to be rated; through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands opportunities reflecting real potential for community improvement, through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands constraints within the community requiring attention and comprehension, through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands critical issues in the community pertinent to environmental design and planning, and through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands means and ways for community improvement.

Next, the community representative was asked to rate the following statement on the provision of technical and implementation assistance to the community through the work produced by the design team on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree; implementation strategies for realizing the client community's project have been clearly provided and are workable for the community, and funding strategies for realizing the client community's project have been clearly provided and are workable for the community.

Lastly, communities were asked to rate the following statements; scope of work identified by the client and CCBP was satisfactory, community elected and appointed officials were satisfactorily involved in the project, community workshops were satisfactory, scheduling and presentation of project in phases of completion was satisfactory, the work received satisfactory press coverage, and the CCBP deliverable resulted in proposals for grant money to support implementation of the work.

Overall, the city of Miami stated that they were very pleased with the work that was produced by the studio design team, but they felt that it would be important for them to find state and federal programs that could assist them in funding the implementation of the designs and projects that were produced (Loon, 2009).

STUDENT POST PROJECT ASSESSMENT

As was done with the city of Miami, a survey was sent to students that worked on the project to understand how successful this service learning project was for them. The students were asked to rate from strongly agree to

strongly disagree the following statements regarding the enhancement of their education as a value added experience versus traditional classroom learning; your education has been enhanced working with elected/ appointed officials, your education has been enhanced working with community groups and members of the client community, your education has been enhanced by organizing and conducting community workshops, your education has been enhanced by working with a faculty mentor fulfilling responsibilities of primary investigator, your education has been enhanced through in-depth basic research activity that is applied in a "real world" situation, your education has been enhanced through completion of a professional level planning and design document as a "deliverable" to a client community, how important was the work completed by the CCBP in assisting you in securing a summer internship and/ or a full time position, how important was the work completed by the CCBP in assisting you in your professional practice post graduation, how successful was the work completed by the CCBP in furthering the missions of the University of Oklahoma, the College of Architecture, and the Division of Landscape Architecture, how important do you think a project like this is for all landscape architecture students across the country, how important was it to have a "real world" project in your urban design studio course, and how useful of an alternative instructional method do you find a project like this to be in the context of a landscape architectural curriculum.

Additionally, the students were asked to rate the following statements regarding the enhancement of public education and empowerment relative to quality of life issues in the environments they inhabit. The following statements were to be rated; through the work completed by the CCBP your community better understands opportunities reflecting real potential for community improvement, through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands constraints within the community requiring attention and comprehension, through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands critical issues in the community pertinent to environmental design and planning, and through the work completed by the CCBP, your community better understands means and ways for community improvement.

Next, students were asked to rate the following statement on the provision of technical and implementation assistance to the community through the work produced by the studio design team on a scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree; implementation strategies for realizing the client community's project have been clearly provided and are workable for the community, funding strategies for realizing the client community's project have been clearly provided and are workable for the community, community elected and appointed officials were satisfactorily involved in the project, community workshops were satisfactory and helpful to the community, scheduling and presentation of projects in phases of completion was satisfactory, and the work received satisfactory press coverage.

Overall, students agreed and strongly agreed with all the statements except for how important the work completed by the CCBP was in assisting them in securing a summer internship and/ or a full time position, and funding strategies for realizing the client community's project have been clearly provided and are workable for the community (Loon, 2009). These two issues will be further addressed in subsequent service learning projects.

AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

As with many service learning projects, after the project is complete the studio design team analyzes the success of the project. It was found that there were a number of issues that all members felt could have been handled in a different manner or designs that could have been further refined. Despite this, the studio design team submitted the project to the 2009 ASLA Central States Conference in Omaha, Nebraska which took place on May 14 – 16, 2009. The design team was pleased to win a merit award in the student communications category for their work. Additionally, at the May 19, 2009 Special Transportation Commission meeting for ODOT held in Oklahoma City director Gary Ridley recognized the award winning project produced by the design team and commended the collaborative effort that was displayed with a local community working with ODOT and the University of Oklahoma, and Oklahoma Scenic Byways.

OUTCOMES

There were clearly many successes with this service learning project and the city of Miami definitely benefited from their collaboration with the studio design team, but who really benefitted more from the project; the students or the community? This type of project is successful because it allows students to work with a real

community, it provides a community with lasting assistance, and it also provides students the opportunity to conduct applied research in the form of service learning. With that said, through the post project assessment that was conducted all parties agreed that all benefited greatly from the project (Loon, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

This type of work will continue to develop over time. It is the hope of the faculty involved with this project that many more service learning projects to assist Oklahoma communities will be performed in the future. The need for such work definitely exists in Oklahoma where there are many small communities that are in need of assistance. Additionally, the benefits of such work are clear in that students realize a non-traditional educational experience, communities work with design teams to realize a cohesive vision, and faculty are afforded the opportunity for applied research. Such work can only continue with interested faculty and the financial support of Oklahoma Scenic Byways and the University of Oklahoma Outreach.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Leehu Loon is an Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture in the College of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma. Loon currently teaches graduate level courses relating to introductory design, urban design, computer applications, construction materials, site grading and storm water management. Prior to his appointment at the University of Oklahoma, Loon taught at the George Washington University and practiced landscape architecture in Washington, DC. Loon is a licensed landscape architect in the state of Oklahoma and practices on a part-time basis.

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APPENDIX 1

Community Needs Assessment Questionnaire

1. What does your organization do? If you are representing a community, please describe your community and what makes it unique.
2. How many people does your organization or community serve?
3. Has your organization or community partnered to work on similar projects in the past? If yes, describe that project.
4. What type of services are you requesting from the design team?
5. What is your timeline for this project?
6. Is there some funding that has been acquired or allocated for this project? Is the funding for the design services or for the actual construction of the project? Please explain.
7. Does your community feel comfortable paying a portion of the fees that the design team will need to complete the project? If so, what amount or percentage is possible? If not, please explain why. It is important to make clear that the matter of funding is not the most important attribute that the design team uses for deciding which projects we will work on. The actual need is more important than the money that an organization or community has. If your organization or community does not have any money that can go to this project please contact the design center as there are possible funding opportunities that exist.
8. Has your organization or community applied for a Scenic Byways Grant in the past? If yes, please provide the proposal/ grant number and further information about it.
9. Will this project enhance the graduate students' experience? If so, how specifically?
10. Will this project enhance the community's sense of empowerment relative to quality of life issues in the environments they inhabit? If so, how specifically?
11. Is there a provision of technical and implementation assistance to community with this project? If so, how specifically?