

# UNSTAKED TERRITORY: Frontiers of Beginning Design

Proceedings of the 19th National Conference on the Beginning  
Design Student, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma  
April 3-5, 2003



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Challenging The Boundaries I  
Challenging The Boundaries II  
Integrating The Boundaries  
Obscuring The Boundaries  
Various Terrains  
Initial Terrain

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## **Making it Real: Ecological Urban Design in the Second Year Studio**

By Bianca George and Shannon Chance

Hampton University's Department of Architecture contributes to improving our local environment on a daily basis. The Department emphasizes design for urban communities; the 8 faculty members and 150 students typically engage projects where they can offer ideas for urban enhancement to community groups seeking design advice. Faculty members carefully frame assignments in order to generate ideas while simultaneously meeting curricular objectives and integrating pertinent architectural issues.

The Architecture Department's service learning arm called the "Urban Institute" provides a vehicle for connecting community groups, funding sources and student design talent. The "Institute" was founded in 1998 with support from the Fannie Mae Foundation, which has funded several projects and trips for the Architecture Department. Hampton University architecture studios have worked with groups ranging from Buddhist organizations and Freemason chapters to Civic Leagues of Hampton and Portsmouth. Such service learning offers students the chance to work on 'real' projects, with 'real' client- partners, while contributing to the improvement of our environment.

Last November Hampton University's Second Year Design Studio aligned with Port Norfolk Civic League to generate ideas for urban waterfront redevelopment. The Civic League decided to solicit design advice from Hampton University because they needed help identifying options and opportunities to enhance their environment following highway construction. The League will use the ideas as they seek funding for design development and physical construction. Students proposed a variety of ideas for the physical, social, and ecological restoration of the once- active riverfront beach, and received enthusiastic response from league members and local architects who provided periodic input during the five week project.

This student presentation by second year architecture student Bianca George will describe the design process, proposals, and pedagogical rationale for conducting such projects.

As a part of the curriculum for the Department of Architecture at Hampton University, the Second Year studio conducts an annual design project involving a waterfront site. Unlike second year studios in the past, this year students were given the opportunity to further expand on the waterfront project by incorporating aspects of urban design. The site for the urban waterfront redevelopment project was located in the Historic District of Port Norfolk in Portsmouth, Virginia. Students analyzed this nationally registered historic district and proposed schematic designs for waterfront paths, boardwalks, and gathering spaces in the blue collar, racially diverse 1890s neighborhood. Over the past years, the neighborhood has grown to be a densely populated area and faces heavy traffic due to an interstate highway that empties into the neighborhood. Design students considered the current environmental conditions of the waterfront and

its feeder creek and researched ways in which to improve the neighborhood conditions.

To help the second year students in their design processes and in their ecological knowledge, the professors incorporated a variety of learning experiences. In the Physical Environment class, a support course to the design studio, students were asked to research wetlands, their importance, and different restoration techniques. They used this knowledge to further investigate the different sustainable materials and structures that can be incorporated in this environmentally sensitive waterfront area in Port Norfolk.

Another experience that added to the integrity of the students' ideas and outcome of their final projects was the weekend trip to Baltimore, Maryland that was partially funded by the Department of Housing Urban Development (HUD). Along the way to Baltimore, the students visited the Virginia Marine Science Institute and walked through an actual wetland habitat to see different ecological processes and observe ways to maintain the wetland. They also toured the Chesapeake Bay Foundation Headquarters, a structure that uses the most environmentally safe techniques and equipment available. In Baltimore students visited the National Aquarium and the urban waterfront area, while observing how different structures relate and interact with the waterfront, while analyzing the use of materials for the boardwalk such as brick and cobblestone.

On their own initiative, many students took advantage of the different resources around them to further develop their design processes. For example, students went to Portsmouth City Hall to obtain maps of Port Norfolk showing both private property and public land holdings, and different zoning areas of buildable land. They investigated city parking ordinances, wetland ordinances and restoration techniques, sustainable construction methods, and national historic surveys. Other students met with contractors, civil engineers, and city planners currently constructing the new bridge. Students also talked with different people within the community who shared the history of the neighborhood and offered their own visions of how the waterfront should look.

Using the different resources gathered from talking to people within the community as well as investigating urban patterns, students divided into groups. They then analyzed aspects of the neighborhood that they found important to the overall design and relationship of the path and the structure. Examples of these analyses include location and number of streetlights; axis to nodes such as the water tower, churches, and business district; sidewalks for pedestrians; alleys and streets. Other students focused on the unique characteristics of the neighborhood such as the column styles, color of houses, and concentration of trees along streets. Then the groups made conceptual models and drawings that incorporated aspects of several analyses. These models helped convey the students' interpretation of what his or her path and structure would add to the neighborhood, and how the design proposals would create areas for people to enjoy and gather in this natural setting.

The students then branched off on their own and concentrated on redesigning or adding to the ideas that the group had previously made on the path and structure. Several students incorporated ideas of Japanese

architecture into the construction of their path and structure, while others concentrated on the historical architecture of the Victorian style houses in the neighborhood. The project brought even grander ideas from students who wanted to almost create another city on the water, with big, bright lights and long walkways, which would span the entire waterfront to attract people from within the community and visitors from outside as well.

The highway construction contract underway includes a pedestrian and bicycle path accessing the neighborhood that will eventually become part of a larger “multi-city”, “multi-use” path. The contract also includes some funds to convert Bayview Boulevard (along the industrial waterfront), an existing highway back to a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood street. The Civic League aims to carry improvements even further by reshaping the waterfront, expanding access, and returning the waterfront to a place for Portsmouth residents to gather as in the neighborhood’s early days.

Considering these ideas from the Civic League, the objectives of the project were four fold: 1) to analyze an existing urban district and design within its context; 2) to promote an understanding of natural ecology and sustainable materials, techniques and design; 3) to develop a relationship between path and place that would show visitors how to enter and exit the path from adjacent bike paths and streets; and 4) to enhance waterfront use and accessibility. The students had to design a path that included the different areas of the neighborhood such as the business area and the abandoned school building. They recommended structures for the waterfront such as docks, boardwalks, and/or gazebos, to provide shelter and frame views out to the water as well as back to the neighborhood.

The project has been well received by students and faculty at Hampton University, a Historically Black College/ University (HBCU). The project meets the educational goals for the University’s second year architecture program, and with the Architecture Department’s overall mission of urban and community design. This year’s project has a physical site, with increased emphasis on the natural, built and social context. The students learned site analysis and basic programming skills in designing the urban waterfront path, and then had the opportunity to develop small structures along the path, of a size and complexity appropriate to the introductory design curriculum. The project offers beginning design students opportunity to engage urban design and architectural ecology in a way that can have substantial positive influence and build the sense of community within a racially diverse city.

Other educators agree that these types of service learning projects enhance the relevance of design projects within the HBCU settings. In his book [The Crisis of the African American Architect: Conflicting Cultures of Architecture and \(Black\) Power](#), Melvin Mitchell speaks about context of service learning in the education of architecture students:

“ Without full and proper context, Rowe’s pedagogy will only continue to retard the progress of students seeking roles of effectiveness in culture specific community development. The ‘Colin Rowe studio’ approach to

architectural education holds relevance for the typical HBCU architecture program only when fully comprehended, and placed in proper historical, social, cultural, and Information Technology based context by those attempting to apply this methodology. This pedagogy is largely confined to formal and spatial technique while purporting to be non- ideological on critical social, economic, and cultural issues confronting the next generation of African- American architects.” - *Mitchell, Melvin L. The Crisis of the African-American Architect: Conflicting Cultures of Architecture and (Black) Power. (New York: Writers Club Press. 2001), 179.*

As an African American architecture student who studies at an HBCU, this project has proven to be a worthwhile ‘hands on’ experience for me and other students. The service learning project is an effective way to teach and inform students of the architectural and ecological issues that many architects face in the typical urban community. Issues such as integrating the historical aspects of the community, incorporating the unique and rich culture of the residents to provide spaces for people to enjoy and inhabit, as well as using structures that do not inhibit the environment or beauty of the neighborhood affect and define the nature of the community. Furthermore, this project has helped students gain better communication skills and diverse viewpoints by creating relationships with people in the neighborhood and with local architects. From visiting the site regularly to using different aspects of the community, students were able to understand and use architectural and ecological issues to better the urban community as a whole.

Teaching architectural principles of abstract and modern design are beneficial to the development of a ‘true’ architect, however, this should not limit professors and students from learning more about the complexities of the urban environment. In an HBCU setting, projects like the waterfront redevelopment of Port Norfolk help students make abstract architectural principles that are seen in models and drawings become real. ‘Real’ in the sense that from an African American standpoint, students can relate to and use the historical, social, cultural, and economic aspects of an urban environment and create gathering spaces that reflect the essence of architecture.