Searching for Connections—For the Future of Education/Practice Partnerships

A recurring question about any professional school is “What is the primary goal of the education process?” Are universities supposed to equip students with a foundational knowledge of a profession or are they supposed to prepare a student for practice and exploration? Or, as most of us now practicing have learned to ask, “Is architecture an art or a business?”

The values and technology now driving the practice of design and construction are breaking down the decades-long view of the either/or nature of being an architect (or any professional) in today’s world.

**Design schools and professional offices need increasing interaction in order to find mutual benefits as we all face the rapidly changing social, economic and environmental shifts.**

Now is the time for the academy and the practice to intentionally partner to better secure our future. Our goal should be to integrate and align appropriate shared values across education and practice and to understand that this shift is culturally based and technologically driven. What are these shared key values? For starters, sustainability, resiliency, integrated design processes, performance-driven design, equity and inclusion in the design process as well as a heightened empathy for users and those affected by our work.

These values, as an integral part of foundational preparation, need to be inculcated in design school processes and modeled and reinforced by practitioners. This learn-see-apply process underscores the immersive pedagogy at Ball State University where a major emphasis is placed on highly engaged, hands-on learning across all academic areas of campus through “immersive learning” courses. At the same time, the current explorations described below aim to increase and accelerate the trajectory of student experience to better prepare them for the design and construction professions’ need for students who are comfortable and adept in a professional setting.

The College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State University and SmithGroup are creating a new collaborative model that includes multiple types of interaction between college and firm around the primary ideas of integrated design (largely a practice-driven issue) and immersive learning (largely an academy-driven goal) in order to affect change in both cultures.

How can professionals and schools work together to create synergy and mentoring that produces relationships that accelerate learning, leadership and the sharing of the best of both worlds?

Ball State’s College of Architecture and Planning (CAP), in pursuit of forging closer and more lasting bonds with alumni, wrote a grant proposal in 2017 for what it dubbed a “Firm in Residence” program. The private sector partner was SmithGroup,
an international, 1,300-person design firm with multiple disciplines and markets across 14 offices. While recently updating Ball State’s campus Master Plan, SmithGroup made themselves available to the College of Architecture and Planning’s Landscape Architecture department by participating in the annual Design Week event and helping to lead a design charrette. SmithGroup also has a number of Ball State CAP grads working across the firm in various disciplines so there was a natural fit with the Firm in Residence idea.

As the Firm in Residence program unfolded, four areas of interaction shaped the partnership: guest lectures, interdisciplinary design studio participation, student/professional mentoring and joint research.

SmithGroup provided keynote lectures as part of the 50-year old CAP Guest Lecture Series. Lecturers from SmithGroup addressed multi-disciplinary practice issues—a timely topic for the college, which had just added Construction Management and Interior Design Programs to the already existing Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Urban Planning, Historic Preservation, and Urban Design programs.

Through the GLS, SmithGroup also provided a straightforward look at the future of the design office, focusing on the likelihood of change in the business model and therefore the job market, practice opportunities, different needs for student preparation and related powerful impacts.

A second feature of the FIR model was the development of interdisciplinary studios, which has now spanned three semesters over 2 academic years. The process began with a charge to find an opportunity that would allow students and firm members to work out of one of the SmithGroup offices on a pro-bono project that engaged multiple disciplines. This was considered a particularly immersive way to reinforce the changing values that drive design.

In the SmithGroup Chicago office, Urban Designer and Landscape Architect, Kris Lucius put forward the Chicago Stockyards as a candidate site. The stockyards, a square-mile area made famous by Sinclair Lewis in his book, The Jungle, were

The stockyards project for me was an interesting and challenging project where we were able to collaborate with practicing professionals and learn from their experiences to help shape our project.

It was nice to have access to both the people at SmithGroup along with their offices. This interaction with the people at SmithGroup was a driving factor in how I approached my project during the semester.

Adam Freeby, CAP Architecture student

KEY COMPONENTS OF ALL THE STOCKYARD STUDIOS PROJECT INCLUDED:

- Developing a framework that focused on revising the legacy of the site. The main emphasis became a holistic food/urban food/urban ag-based economic model
- Respecting social justice aspects, especially regarding adjacent long-time neighborhood groups
- Finding new approaches to urban design corridors
- Adapting a wide range of appropriate housing prototypes
- Responding to the need for artful building infill
once the economic engine for Chicago, processing most of the meat that fed the nation. But since 1978, the property has sat idle for the most part. The SmithGroup office has been supporting a number of local organizations and political leaders in their attempts to define the problem and understand potential frameworks for the rejuvenation of the entire district. The project became the first test case for the joint studio model.

Over the summer and fall of 2018, nine different studio sections from Architecture, Urban Design and Urban Planning, at both graduate and undergraduate levels, visited and worked on the Stockyards project with input from SmithGroup staff. The first studio, a summer graduate urban design studio, created a stockyards framework plan that defined and contextualized the projects that were then picked up by eight undergraduate studios last fall. While studios worked largely independently, structured touchpoints along the way allowed student sections to interact with each other. Visits and design charrettes in the SmithGroup Chicago office were common events for each section. While the studio cohorts were at different levels (graduate and undergraduate) and from different disciplines, there was considerable convergence in themes of the projects. Studio cohorts were significantly influenced by the contact with other disciplines within the college and firm along the way.

The joint studio model has created value for both partners, but both parties wanted to increase professional-student contact, the third component of the FIR model. Conceptually, the goal was to emulate what happens when a student is “taken under wing” by a professional mentor. The benefits of such relationships often stretch beyond the studio project to longer-term relationships that can accelerate a student/recent graduate’s trajectory and success in the field.

During spring semester 2019, our collaboration has turned to testing this relationship building, using technology to connect professionals with students over the course of a semester. Three small studio design teams have been formed to work with three SmithGroup integrated critique teams, each consisting of an architect, an engineer and either a landscape architect or planner. These video critiques are building relationships and person-to-person rapport.

As a Ball State alum and leader of an interdisciplinary urban design team at SmithGroup, the opportunity to collaborate on this effort was deeply personal for me. The outcomes exceeded my expectations and set precedents for how we should practice and educate in the future.

Michael Johnson, SmithGroup, Ann Arbor
This model provides a framework that is highly scalable across the college and could easily include a wider array of professionals. All the collaboration and interaction is remote via new collaboration technologies on campus and SmithGroup’s own infrastructure. Most large firms now regularly collaborate over space and time, so this is one more element of how students need to learn to work with both clients and peers.

The idea of a firm-in-residence can easily be duplicated with both local and national firms and can be adopted at other institutions of all sizes and complexity. The platform offers the types of lasting relationships that can create and drive shared values and more quickly respond to change in both education and practice. Finally, it supports immersive learning in the academy and affords practitioners the opportunity to learn from and mentor the next generation of our industries.

We tried this collaboration as an experiment and it has dramatically exceeded our expectations. We believe this type of partnership will become increasingly effective in moving our programs forward while engaging us in meaningful dialogue about future models of practice.

David Ferguson
What have we learned so far?

- A model to advance interdisciplinary process in design education. Integrated design is our daily culture in practice, even though we were all trained in silos. Most schools don’t have the breadth of disciplines to create an integrated design culture.
- Real-world, immersive planning and design opportunity with client interactions.
- Growth in design criticism culture in the SmithGroup office by involving engineers and junior designers in academic critique.
- Ability to be involved in urbanism discussions about a part of Chicago that isn’t currently getting much attention (or funding) for real projects.
- Enhanced synergy and local relationships that connect SmithGroup thought leadership and community activities in Chicago.
- A tested model that other firms can participate in and that is transferable to other universities and professions.
- Students are drawn to real-world, high-impact projects that solidify their commitment to becoming (licensed) practitioners.
- Students develop another avenue for creative input for projects while potentially gaining mentors for their professional lives.

Troy Thompson, AIA, LEED AP, is one of three Managing Partners leading SmithGroup. In this role, he is responsible for innovation, design quality, discipline tools, research, IT and staff development. SmithGroup is a fully integrated design firm with over 1,300 staff in 14 offices.

Dave Ferguson is interim Dean for the College of Architecture and Planning at Ball State University. His background includes experience as lead designer and Director of Marketing for private practice design firms. As a professor in the College of Architecture and Planning for over 30 years, Dave has conducted research on the future of cities and sustainable design, and teaches in the Landscape Architecture and Master of Urban Design programs.

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The Way of Authentic Leadership – Part I

The Influencer Mindset
Growing Relevance in the Face of Change, Challenge and Opportunity

Increasing Industry Vitality Through Innovation

The Evolution and Future of Immersive, Real-Time Technologies

Sustainable Design: A Worthy Investment

Searching for Connections—For the Future “of Education/Practice Partnerships

The Transactive Network: Supporting New Building Paradigm

On Climate Change and Hope: Despite rising carbon dioxide emissions, we can still tackle global warming

DFC FIRM HIGHLIGHTS: The New tvsdesign

The Death of the Architecture Firm

Celebrating Success: 25 years of the Design Futures Council

A Vision for the Future

“Modernise or Die”—A Look at the Future of the Construction Industry, Part 2

Playing Catch Up