

Abstract: Erasing Boundaries: Service Learning in Architecture
Landscape Architecture and Planning Symposium 2011

Farms to Schools: Healthier Communities through Service Learning

Section One: Background

There is a national conversation going on about the need for healthier communities, for conquering childhood obesity, assuring food justice and planning for food security. How do Landscape Architects contribute their skills and activate their students in this conversation at the local level? One key to aligning education with local community building involves the commitment of faculty to participate outside the academy in local non-profit and public organizations. The Planning Department of San Luis Obispo, CA asked for ideas for the use of a city-owned 25-acre parcel of land that would benefit the community and serve as a reminder of the City's agricultural roots. This provided a unique opportunity for Cal Poly students to partner with local planners, educators and farmers. Through programming, students demonstrated critical thinking by adding a working organic farm, education center and food-processing hub to the site. The organizing structure of this project will provide fresh food for Farm to School Programs and the local Food Bank. A non-profit will manage the facility for the City. Students at Cal Poly State University, San Luis Obispo, CA designed the site and presented it to the community. It is currently on the City Council's agenda for approval in mid 2011.

Section Two: Course Objectives

Activate critical thinking about the issues of regional food systems and the cultural/agricultural vernacular by linking the following three ideas:

- Expand professional commitment to socially relevant community issues
- Understand the pressures of current land use and the importance of preserving agricultural landscapes
- Develop an educational facility for local school groups to learn about the culture and practice of farming

Connect students with local farmers, nutritionists, chefs, schools, non-profits and government officials.

Initiate a relationship between the College of Agriculture Center for Sustainability and the Landscape Architecture Department through service learning projects.

Section Three: Methods/Approach

To formulate new patterns of learning, two faculty members teaching 3rd and 4th year students combined two courses in one studio space. Students in both a Design Implementation Focus Studio and Cultural Environments Focus Studio worked together to stimulate critical and reflexive thinking.

Both studios researched local agricultural history, regional farm architecture and site environmental issues. They also examined precedents of agricultural education centers for K-12 children and requirements for farm workers. The Design Implementation Studio produced a set of Design and Contract Documents for the farm. The Cultural Environments Studio continued to research the

agricultural and ranching vernacular. Using the same site as the partner studio, this studio also went on to design a farm-based education center.

Using "Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy of Learning in the Cognitive Domain," we proceeded in the following way:

Knowledge: students used information from previous courses in Ecology, Cultural Landscapes and Construction Implementation.

Comprehension: students demonstrated an understanding of the issues by engaging guest lecturers and transforming required readings and videos into essays and other forms of creative expression. They predicted the consequences of sustainable land use practices and the preservation of the agricultural vernacular.

Application: through programming, concept development and multiple approaches to site design, students expanded their design vocabulary and their vision for socially relevant community issues.

Analysis: students formulated new organizing structures for the site and received critiques from inside and outside the academy.

Synthesis: each student uniquely communicated his/her design, which reflected both research and analysis. Students also formulated new patterns of site organization and land use.

Evaluation: the faculty and the public evaluated each student project using the following criteria:

- Does the project clearly communicate its vision to the public including the program development and expression?
- Does the project meet the goals and objectives of city officials and the community?
- Does the project address the issues of the social responsibility and the consequences of land-use decisions?

Section Four: Results and Conclusions

Thirty-four students presented Landscape Architecture designs for the community's critical response. City and County officials asked us to continue designing the site for approval. Two students and one faculty member currently work on the project. Plans will go before the City Council in April 2011.

By working with a broad spectrum of community members in a service-based project, students expanded their knowledge of food systems, school lunch programs, farm workers, the planning process and regional culture.

--Astrid Reeves, Lecturer