

# Community Outreach Studio: Teaching Socially Responsible Practice in Interior Design Education

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**Abstract:** Design educators have the responsibility to teach future designers how to critically evaluate their production and its function and meaning in society. Yet, little discussion has been devoted in the education of interior design that would prepare future designers to recognize the opportunities to contribute towards a society. This paper proposes that an interior design studio can be a dynamic medium for exploring the creative potential of socially responsible design. A studio example is presented: International Project, Haiti Orphanage Project, and "Be Like Brit" in Grand Grove, Haiti. The students began the project by researching about the site's geographical, social, cultural conditions and historical and current built environment. The students then developed with design solutions and suggestions that meet the social need by closely working with the clients or the user's liaison. Project's demands came from the community, and the solution responds to genuine needs, such as natural disaster relief, housing demand, or other unique needs. By implementing socially responsible design opportunity to student's studio experience, , this paper seeks to address the importance of educating students about the social impact of design through interior design curriculum.

## Introduction

Recognizing the impact of the built environment in social problems and the accountability of the designers in responding to the recognizing of the impact, professional organizations and academic programs have initiated socially responsible design education. Socially responsible learning has become popular throughout higher education by adopting a service learning (Barber 1992; Cisneros 1995; Coles 1993). This educational practice emphasizes learning through service to the community. It has brought out the question of how a design education can incorporate socially responsible learning into the design education structure.

The goal of interior design program is to prepare students for their professional practice upon completion of their studies. Organizations like IDEC (Interior Design Educators Council) and CIDA (the Council for Interior Design Accreditation) recommend specific core competencies for programs that include generic attributes, domain specific skills, and integrative skills. It requires the basis for a social compact for the interior design profession and ethics to be taught as a part of professional values in the credited programs. As interior design's principal intent is to design a space 'in order to enhance the quality of life and protect the health, safety and welfare of the public' in relationship to their environment (IFI 1983), this objective, in essence, encompasses the idea of socially responsible design.

A design studio can be an especially dynamic medium to test the productive potential of interior design's social compact. A studio project gives students opportunities to test their ideas and to receive critiques both at philosophical and pragmatic levels. This interaction enables students to explore the creative potential of socially responsible design in shaping spaces and influencing the life styles that these spaces accommodate.

### **Studio: Methodology**

Recognizing this productive capacity of a studio course, an interior design project with a focus on socially responsible practice was introduced in Endicott Interior Design graduate program. A community outreach project was implemented as one of the projects in the studio course during the Fall semester of the 2010 year to Spring semester of 2012. The studio intended to introduce a socially responsible design on top of consolidated knowledge and curriculum subjects such as pre-design research, space planning, materials, lighting, furniture and building systems to the creation and development of an interior.

The studio was structured with one instructor, the clients (includes client's liason) and graduate students. Guest critics were invited for their milestone presentations to the clients and the students. The teaching method aimed to reflect the dynamic and complex nature of studio learning by giving students the opportunity to be exposed to diverse viewpoints. Individual desk critiques and group discussions of projects were implemented to develop individual design approaches and refined design applications. Students were asked to express and record their thought process through sketches, conceptual models/drawings and research documentation, which also has constituted a part of their final presentation and evaluation.

### **Research**

The research component of the course was meant to obtain a greater understanding of the communities and their needs. The students were asked to develop a paper and presentation based on the topics including Haiti's geographical, historical, political, cultural conditions, Haitian Architecture and Art, and materials and construction method available in Haiti. By understanding the region, Haiti, students can achieve a greater depth of understanding of the meaning of socially responsible design process.

## Client

From initial to final phases of the project, students collaborated with the clients through different means, including interviews, emails, and the class design charrette. The clients of this project placed great importance on the community's need in Grand Grove, Haiti where they build the orphanage. The clients met with the students at several critical points of the progress and final student project reviews.



Figure 1 Design Charrette with the clients

## Studio constructs

The clients introduced their needs regarding the overall design ideas of the orphanage building and the outdoor area and specific ideas of installation method of design ideas. Their needs included the courtyard's altar for religious service and performance, children room design for 6 in one room, and an outdoor children play area for safe and shaded play space. Students did their design process as a team.



Figure 2. Children play room design



Figure 3. Courtyard View

The clients provided the students with the information of what the orphanage need in Grand Grove Haiti. As Cortes recommended, in order for the education of the university to be complete, it “would include working on actual, real-world problems facing their campus, community, government and industry. The process would also increase group work and learning so graduates will be able to collaborate effectively on complex problems as future manager and leaders.”

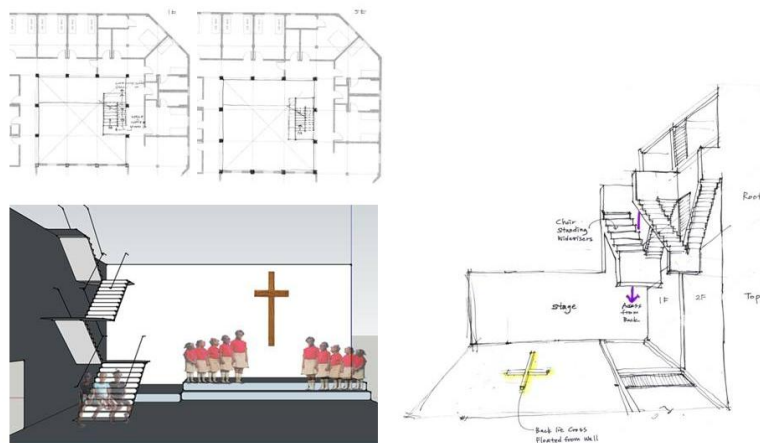


Figure 4. Courtyard Altar, Design Charrette

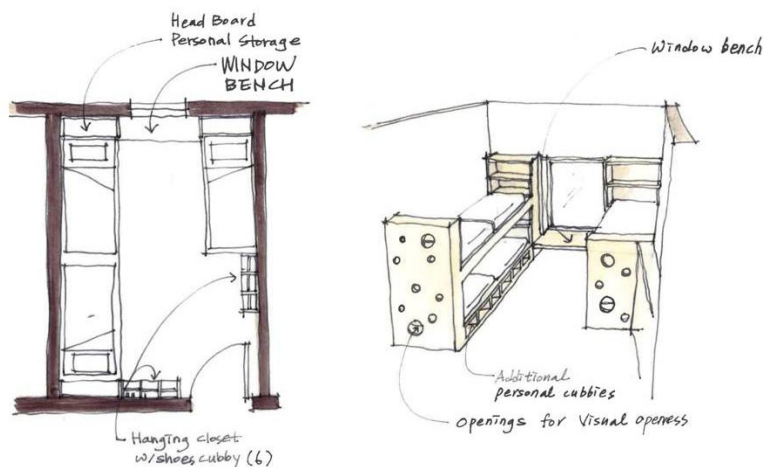
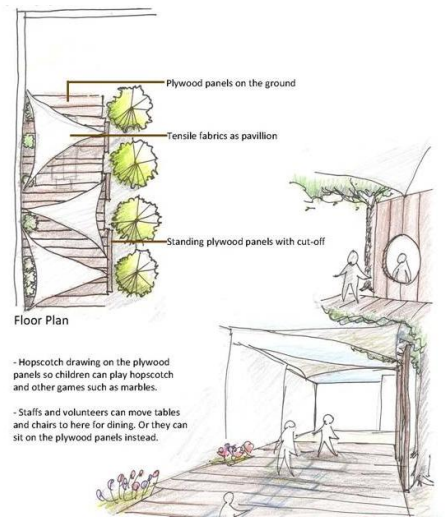
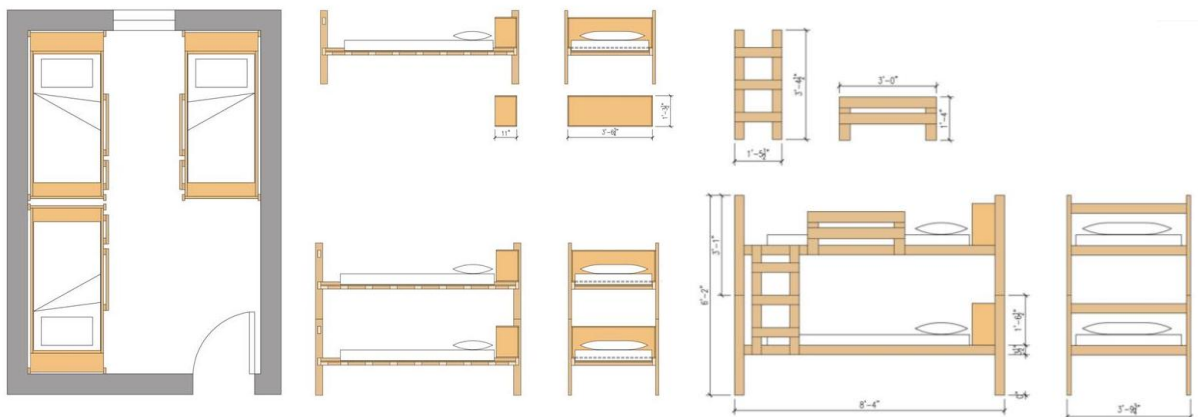


Figure 5. 6 Children room, Design Charrette



**Figure 6. Outdoor play area, Design Charrette**

Following the development of courtyard altar, children's room, outdoor play area, students move on the the scale of furniture. The students began their investigation of the design of furniture in children's room with the material of plywood as surplus plywood was available after the construction of the building. Students designed purposeful built-in furniture within the children room in order to utilize available tool and construction skill given at the site. During the last phase of the studio process, students were exposed to social and political dilemmas involved in international design. For example, when the students completed the projects and planned to visit Haiti, they were faced with the fact that Haiti is on the list of "traveling warning country" in US state department.



**Figure 7. 6 Children Room Furniture Design**



**Figure 8. 6 Children Room Furniture Construction**



**Figure 9. Courtyard Alter Construction**

## **Conclusion**

From our observation of the level of students' preparedness as they start this studio, they previously had little exposure to socially responsible design process. By the challenges throughout the studio, students could achieve the level of an understanding of the integrated approach from the rigorous research to design a viable socially responsibly built environment.

In the community outreach studio model, the faculty guides the students' work with multiple publics. Students are introduced to a real community. The students are responsible for finding out about the communities and their needs. Through a process of client meetings, students learn a variety of skills including working collaboratively; organizing design ideas for the consensus of the building, effective communication with the clients, and dealing with multiple publics. Students also learn the impact of local politics on planning and design, such as competing viewpoints on community problems and methods of implementation. In this way students acquire necessary skills to work in different communities as a designer. At the same time, students develop their professional skills of design and graphic presentation to the community, helping the clients to visualize their future built environment.

Since many of the interior design students' future clients will represent social, cultural, and economic characteristics outside their own realm of experience and understanding, the greatest benefit of the socially



responsible learning studio is exposing students to diverse and different perspectives. The model of community outreach studio can offer interior designers new opportunities to understand the different views and needs and they can contribute to a community with their design solutions. Students can learn to recognize their role in producing and reproducing social meanings. The more design education includes "socially responsible design" in the curriculum, the more future designers will understand the implications of the choices they can make as a designer.

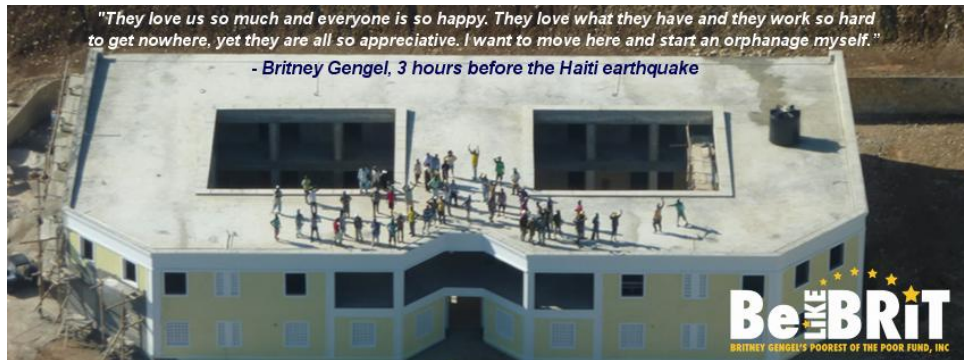


Figure 10. Orphanage View

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