

Critically Engaged Civic learning: Graphic Design as a Bridge Between the Classroom and the Local Community

CLAUDIA BERNASCONI

University of Detroit Mercy

Keywords: Critically Engaged Civic Learning, Critical Service Learning, Graphic Design, Detroit

This paper discusses outcomes from a collaborative project between the School of Architecture and Community Development at Detroit Mercy and the LIVE6 Alliance, a Detroit non-profit organization focusing on neighborhood revitalization via placemaking and engagement with small businesses. A graduate graphic design course was offered in Winter 2020, and provided an opportunity for architecture students to interact with local community members and business owners to brainstorm ideas about identity, place, and economic development. Through an iterative and open-ended process revolving around frequent conversations and concept proposals, students learned to interpret key identity traits of local businesses, to acknowledge the values they bring to the urban corridor, and applied graphic design knowledge built in the classroom to develop alternative branding design ideas. The pedagogical approach of the course aligns with the frameworks of Critically Engaged Civic Learning (Vincent et al. 2021) and Critical Service learning (Mitchell 2008). Embracing these frameworks in the course helped students understand perspectives of community partners and become more aware of their design agency as co-creators. Forms of co-production and co-authorship were fostered to decolonize the design process, building on authentic relationships and a deeper understanding of branding as a defining way of expressing values of individuals, communities and places. At the urban scale, the loosely coordinated collective work of all teams along the corridor, spurred students to understand graphic design as an urban activator and as an element of placemaking at the scale of the neighborhood. The project was interrupted during online and hybrid learning. This hiatus provided time to reflect on lessons learned, including learning outcomes for students and community perceptions, and directions for future collaborations with LIVE6 Alliance towards a student learning that is centered around the search for a co-constructed design agency.

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

A graduate graphic design course, offered in Winter 2020 at University of Detroit Mercy, provided an opportunity for architecture students to interact with local community members and business owners to brainstorm ideas about identity, place, and economic development. This paper includes reflections on a graphic design engagement project attached to the course. The project was funded through a Ford Community Corps Partnership grant awarded by the Institute of Leadership and Service at Detroit Mercy, which allowed for a teaching assistant/student leader to work with faculty ahead of the semester to brainstorm and strategize about the project in collaboration with the Live6 Alliance, a Detroit non-profit organization focusing on neighborhood revitalization via placemaking and engagement with small businesses. The underlying idea of the project was that shifting from the classroom to the neighborhood would require new approaches and methods for the design process. The project explored how critical Service Learning (CSL) and Critically Engaged Civic Learning (CECL) frameworks can be adopted in the context of graphic design to inform an outreach opportunity in which the engagement is allowed to drive goals, methods and content of the course. The project tested how CSL and CECL opportunities embed students in forms of learning that spur them to think of themselves as part of a whole and to approach design as co-constructed process with the community, going beyond preconceived ideas of “doing for” the community, and embrace practices of “doing with” the community.

The engagement project called for the questioning of narratives in graphic design in the context of place, identity and potential gentrification processes. The context of the project was an urban area surrounding two main commercial corridors in proximity of the University District, bordering University of Detroit Mercy in Detroit. The Livernois and McNichols corridors are going through important urban corridor revitalization and community development projects, that have transformed much of the street environment and parts of the neighborhood. At the time of the project, both corridors were under intense construction, with the placement of a new median, the enlargement of sidewalks and plans for new street furniture, lighting and signage. These recent interventions called for



Figure 1. Students and community partners at Live6 Alliance.

and opened up opportunities for supporting local black business to prevent loss of identity, gentrification processes, and future economic impacts on residents and business owners. Live6 Alliance, the partner organization in the project, has an important role in creating a network for supporting local businesses and residents from four communities surrounding these urban corridors. Working with Live6 Alliance in relation to the graphic design engagement project and the overall course helped bridge academic learning and community outreach from an inside perspective, rather than an outsider's view.

Faculty worked with Live6 Alliance to gain insight on which local businesses were interested in a collaborative graphic design project and began interacting with the business owners. The local business owners entered the project as community partners, with a clear sense that the process of interaction and its outcomes would be tailored to achieve reciprocal learning and benefits. Six community partners participated in the project, representing an array of business typologies along the urban corridors, including a café shop, a bar, an event space, a lounge space, an apparel store, and a hairdresser store. During one semester, preceding the graphic design course, the faculty and the student leader met multiple times with each of the community partners to begin conversations about what could be the desirable level of interaction, type of process, and outcomes of the project, based on priorities, businesses models and current opportunities for each business. This pre-course negotiating period was important as it fostered trust-based relationships prior to the start of the project and laid the ground for the definition of broad shared goals. Negotiations in interactions, expectations, and deliverables were anticipated to continue during the interactions between students and community partners. The graphic design course was structured to provide first an introduction to basic graphic design tools and techniques, followed by a short preparatory branding exercise prior to launching the design engagement project. Thirteen students participated in the project, divided in six small teams.

The engagement process began with small group meetings between students and community partners. Each student team worked independently with the community partners during the semester to gain an understanding of priorities, aspirations and identities of the local businesses, and drew from graphic design knowledge previously built in the classroom to co-shape the design process with the community partners.

CRITICALLY ENGAGED CIVIC LEARNING AND CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING FRAMEWORKS

The pedagogical approach of the graphic design engagement project was founded on the pedagogical frameworks of Critical Service Learning (CSL) and Critically Engaged Civic Learning (CECL, Vincent, et al., 2001). The two frameworks have numerous overlaps, with CECL being a revisited and more current approach based on CSL. An in-depth discussion of service-learning approaches and CSL in relation to design build projects and activities can be found in (Bernasconi et al., 2019). For the purpose of this paper, the discussion that follows provides a brief overview of key aspects of each framework. Service-learning stems from ideas of experiential out-of-the-classroom reciprocal learning (Sigmon 1979), and has been assessed, critiqued, and reframed numerous times for several decades. CSL surpasses traditional service-learning approaches through the recognition of the need to embrace a social change perspective and social justice goals (Mitchell 2008). At the center of the critique is the reckoning that service-learning is a process that “constructs, reinforces or disrupts particular unarticulated societal norms of being and thinking” (Butin 2003, 1683). Therefore, issues of power, race and social bias must be acknowledged, including issues of whiteness in service-learning (Green 2001; Mitchell et al. 2012).

As part of the critique, it is important to acknowledge that prejudiced approaches towards underserved communities can disempower communities and perpetuate disparities through the definition by privileged groups of the needs of underprivileged minorities and the framing of such needs as deficiencies (Astin et al. 2000; Mitchell and Humphries 2007). This approach overlaps with a poststructuralist perspective of service-learning, that rejects binary conceptualizations of service learning around “us and them” or “serving and served” relationships (Mitchell and Humphries 2007), to fully recognize the reciprocal nature of learning as co-produced and co-experienced across groups, and also overlaps with political perspectives on service-learning, which focus issues of power, authority and race. At the center of potentially disempowering service-learning experiences, is the problem of students developing a “truncated understanding of the nature of social problems” (Eby 1998, 1). This issue has been long discussed in the literature as an important contributing factor to stereotypical approaches towards underserved communities. In contrast, the development of an ability to understand social contexts and broad patterns, defined as *sociological imagination* (Astin et al. 2000), has been linked to more authentic and socially just forms of service-learning.

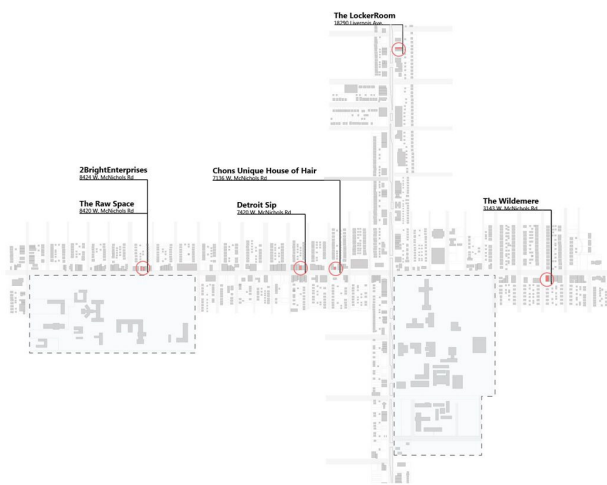


Figure 2. Businesses on Livernois and McNichols corridors in Detroit. Basemap courtesy of the Detroit Collaborative Design Center, University of Detroit Mercy.

In summary, three essential learning related processes can support critical forms of service-learning: the building and sustaining of *authentic relationships* across groups (Mitchell 2008) as a tool to finding fruitful real common grounds; the integration of intentional built-in cycles of *thought, action and reflection* (Jacob and Associates 1996); and the gaining of a broad *awareness of societal issues* together with the unambiguous recognition of such issues as systemic and structural versus individual (Martin and Casault 2005). These three processes allow for the engagement of the person as a whole in the service-learning, supporting personal growth and the forming of new conceptualizations about self, self+others, and self+society (Bernasconi, 2020).

More recently, a revised form of CSL has been proposed by Vincent et al. (2021) and coined as Critically Engaged Civic Learning (CECL). As identified by the 2021 study, at the center of CECL are increased awareness of civic agency and better understanding of the community and workforce preparation towards promoting a redistribution of power and authority among participants. This approach questions the use of “service” as a term, as it simultaneously suggests power disparities amongst the “serving” and “served” groups and implies that issues only affect the “served” group, instead of being understood as structural, shared, and societal. CECL also adopts a clear anti-racist perspective as a foundation of the overall framework. The authors of the study propose six guiding principles for CECL, “social justice, power dynamics, community, civic learning objectives, reflexivity, and sustainability”, and four overarching outcomes, “increased self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-empowerment; increased awareness of civic agency; better understanding of community; and workforce preparation” (Vincent et al. 2021, 108). Within this framework participants, such as community members, students, and institutions, are considered equal stakeholders in the process,

within an “equity-based framework that views all constituent stakeholders as invested partners” (Vincent et al. 2021, 108).

Both CSL and CECL frameworks were referenced to develop the graphic design engagement project. Embracing a CECL approach in the course helped students connect with community partners on a level plane, and understand their perspectives as both local business owners and community members. Presenting all participants of the project as equal stakeholders laid the ground for valuing design agency of community partners as co-creators and initiating a process of sharing stories, ideas, information, research, and know how. Throughout the semester, students engaged in reflexive practices and were prompted to view themselves as co-creators in the design process, as well as civic agents in the community. The CSL framework also suggested various strategies that were embedded in the course. In particular three strategies were implemented: The building of authentic relationships was prompted throughout the semester, through continued, sustained, and independent engagements at the small group scale between students and business owners; time and space for dialogue and discussions allowed for personal and group reflection to be shared and valued throughout the semester (also captured in the CECL framework as reflexivity); and the study of the urban area, as well as the listening to personal narratives and stories of the business owners, supported a broad understanding of social and contextual issues.

DECOLONIZING THE GRAPHIC DESIGN PROCESS

Graphic design, as any other form of art and design, must be included in a critique that takes a look at interconnected questions of colonization and gentrification. The tools and languages of graphic design cannot be understood as neutral, but rather as either intentional or unintentional, aware or unaware, contributors to practices of exclusionary or inclusive, stereotyping or authentic representations. Question of who has agency in design and who is the intended audience are important. At the root of the critique is the idea that “[...] the scholarly apparatus - theories, concepts, and methods - originating in dominant (western) culture always carries with it the ideologies of its origins (Rogal 2015). Within this critique, graphic design as a form of identifying and conveying identity, through messaging and branding, must be considered as a fundamental tool of representation. Representation, in the context of decolonization, is the ability and right of communities or individuals to represent themselves (Smith 2012, 121).

The position adopted to ground the graphic design engagement project was framed by the understanding that the ways in which identity is represented, by individuals or collaboratively by groups or communities, stems from inward-outward views, or outward-inward perspectives, such as for example stereotyped perceptions by tourists or visitors, or from varying hybrid mixes of each. As stated by Rogal “Representations construct our reality.” (Rogal 2015, 3), as they create and sustain



Figure 3. Logo design proposals by the student team for *Chon's Unique House of Hair*, hair salon.

narratives. The graphic design engagement project was shaped by the recognition that new branding materials as new representations could either reinforce and perpetuate, or contrast and innovate current narratives, and that it was crucial to work through co-production and shared authorship, redistributing power in the design process, and ensuring that community partners have agency in defining representations of their identities as community members and business owners, with each business playing an important role in the community, through the long standing anchoring presence in place and/or the service to the community.

The question of agency and perspectives in graphic design language can be associated, at the nuts-and-bolts scale, with the use of ready-made and out-of-context concepts, which in turn may drive the use of predefined approaches. Though graphic design approaches are to be understood and explained as immersed in the continuum of an epoch, which in the current zeitgeist is dominated by fresh ready-to-use rounded sans serif fonts, commonly associated with nostalgia of past decades and minimalistic approaches, there is room for authenticity in allowing the context and stakeholders to drive the concepts, and therefore the language employed. Through the sharing of stories and narratives by the community partners and the



Figure 4. Sample of branded merchandising proposals by student team for *2Bright*, apparel and merchandising store.

iterative collaborative co-production process, the graphic design engagement project strived to distance itself from importing ready-made language, and to balance how to define language within the local context as well as allowing it to speak to the broad continuum of contemporary graphic design.

THE GRAPHIC DESIGN + LIVE6 ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

The graphic design engagement project called for an open-ended design process loosely sequenced through informal conversations between the student teams and the community partners. Prior to that, the first step of the process included research on the neighborhood and general information about the community partners and the businesses. This step was facilitated by the student leader who initiated it during the semester prior to the course. A second step focused on the interaction between students and community partners at their business place. Students learned about stories of the community partners in relation to the history of their business, the neighborhood, and the way the viewed themselves as community members and viewed their business as a community anchors. A thirds phase was focused on materials. Current branding was studied, with particular attention to which motives, aspirations, and reasoning guided the approaches, as well as with consideration of which aspects of current branding were thought of



Figure 5. Samples of process work and final mockups for website graphics and front signage selected by community partners for *Lockeroom*, bar.

as important to the community as memories of past identity or a symbol of the current identity. During this phase, each community partner and student team defined the types of deliverables that aligned with priorities and opportunities for the business. Deliverables ranged from logo design, signage design for the storefront, environmental graphics for the store and facade, packaging ideas for products, and business card design. The fourth phase that followed was particularly important and involved collaboratively brainstorming and co-creating both Keyworks and Tone of Voice tools to identify design concepts for the branding. The subsequent phases then included numerous iterations of three design concepts, with back and forth between the classroom and the place of business, which were gradually narrowed down to two alternative concepts and a final one. A note that the classroom was actually held at Live6 Alliance and not on campus. This allowed the students to be in neighborhood and in a community space, and gave community partners ease of access to our classroom if they wished.

The semantic design tools of Keywords and of Tone of Voice were used to identify with the community partners which values, traits and aspirations best represented the identity of the business. These tools were employed as guidance to define overall design concepts for branding. Keywords brainstormed with the community partners included for example “Confidence”, “Imaginative”, “Giving”, “Feel at home”, and “Multigenerational”. Tone of voice tools function instead as sliders between opposite sets of terms that allow for the finetuning of absolute and relative “temperatures/

intensities". For example, some of the terms identified included "Inviting-Secluded", "Fun-Serious", "Flexible-Prohibitive", or "Tense-Relaxed". After design concepts are defined, students work on Mood Boards that attempted to visualize in broad strokes how tone of voice can be communicated graphically. These boards are used to prompt more brainstorming, finetuning of concepts, and also include precedents and counter-precedents that are discussed with the community partners. Once concepts are defined, proposals are iteratively reviewed, discussed, and edited through conversations with community partners and peer review in the classroom, as well as guidance by the instructor.

Three distinctive elements of the graphic design process fostered through the engagement project differentiated the *modus operandi* from current practices in the profession: the setting/stage for the process at Live6 Alliance and at the place of business bridged academia and the neighborhood and provided for a shared ground for actions; the slow pace and non-monetized work time included in the process enabled gradual and sustained relationships between students and community partners and supported reflexivity; the negotiated goals for the project and their framing in a CSL and CECL pedagogical approaches built-in an awareness of reciprocity in learning, with the full recognition that students were learning how to listen and to incorporate identity representations by the community partners in the proposals, while community partners learned about the research and the tools used during

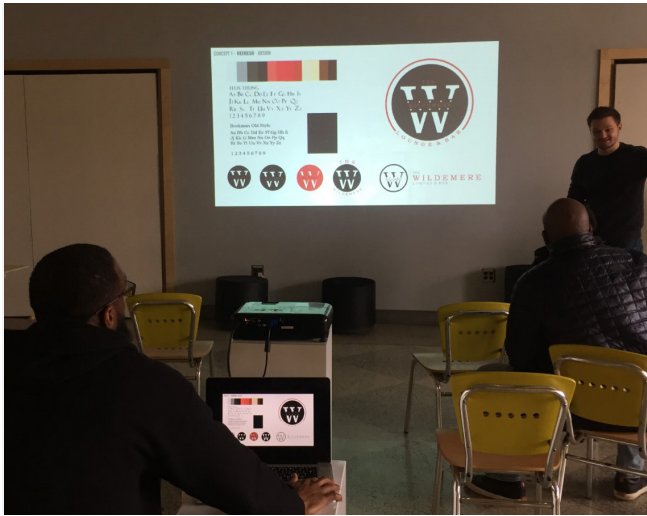


Figure 6. Community partners staying late and running by themselves through the slide presentation to talk with the student team about the design for *The Wildemere*, lounge space.

the design process, contributed ideas for the concepts, and provided useful feedback for subsequent iterations.

OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

The graphic design engagement process allowed students to strive for co-production in the design process and for a form of co-authorship rooted in both authentic relationships with community partners and in the community partners' agency in representing their business identity. The project strived to decolonize the process of design and to go beyond default minimalist design approaches that often perpetuate potentially gentrifying graphic languages. The process fostered a deeper understanding of branding as a defining way of expressing values of individuals, communities and places, and spurred students to recognize the crucial ethical component of graphic design. Additionally, the loosely coordinated collective work of all teams along the corridor, spurred students to understand graphic design as an urban activator and as an element of placemaking at the scale of the neighborhood.

Complete design proposals were formally presented to community members in mid-March 2020, during a final event at Live6 Alliance. The project was interrupted during online and hybrid learning. This became a significant limitation, as for a long time it was not possible to meet with the community partners or test graphic design prototypes at the business sites. Materials were shared with the community partners through the Live6 Alliances for the time being. This hiatus provided time to reflect on lessons learned, including learning outcomes for students and community perceptions. Students reported that they felt the project was a success and that they enjoyed working with the community partners in small teams. They gained a sense of potential impact of the work and felt that the

real-world experience allowed them to better understand how learning can happen inside and outside of the classroom, and that learning can be applied in the community. Excerpts from what shared by students include: *"I really liked this type of project where we could actually integrate what we are learning to something applicable in our community!"*; *"I'm glad I got to participate in this project and see how my community is engaged. I got to see this through different eyes and learn about each business and learn the value of creating identity."* Students also reported that community partners were engaged and sincerely interested in the work, e.g one student wrote the community partner was *"[...] really open and receptive to the kind of work we were passionate about showing him."* (Students, 2020).

In terms of community partners' perspectives, a gradual shift happened during the overall one-year process. When the project was first discussed and envisioned with Live6 Alliance and at the time of initial interaction between the faculty and the prospective community partners, there was a general sense of disbelief and some latent distrust on the community side. Some business owners voiced that they were surprised that the university was stepping out of campus and stepping in the neighborhood. At the same time, all community partners were extremely welcoming and eager to collaborate. This was very encouraging. As time went by, community partners continued to voice their interest in the project and were appreciative of the exchange of ideas and learning that happened throughout the process. All partners were interested in moving the project forward and were excited about the final presentation event and about all final materials. Unfortunately, the collaboration was soon after truncated by the COVID-19 pandemic. After several months, it became apparent that one important limitation of the project was that it involved graduate students only, all of whom by the time the university resumed in-person instruction had graduated and moved on to new endeavors. This was certainly an important lesson learned that calls for a vertical approach to these types of projects, involving undergraduate students as well as graduate ones to ensure more continuity if projects are stalled, as it is imperative that projects of this kind involve sustained engagement over a long period of time. Future directions for the collaboration with LIVE6 Alliance involve building on this project to continue exploring exchanges between the University of Detroit Mercy and the community, and to foster new engagement projects that can provide student learning that is centered around the search for a co-constructed design agency and can contribute to the community through reciprocal learning and the sharing of knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

This project is situated in a larger conversation about curriculum at architecture schools, and in particular at the School of Architecture and Community Development at University of Detroit Mercy, which includes an emphasis on community engagement through a Public Interest Design studio and

other outreach-oriented episodes in the curriculum. Reflections and lessons learned from the graphic design engagement project call for the recognition of the centrality of initiatives in instruction that can spur students to develop a sense of civic responsibility and agency, to see themselves as part of a whole, place, and community, and to open up to ideas of co-production in design, all of which can foster in them more encompassing and complex views on their future role as designers. By allowing other voices and perspectives in the classroom, such as those of stakeholders and community members, and by recognizing the just authority to their expertise and knowledge, educators can ensure that learning is more relevant and civically engaged. Questions of what we teach, who teaches, and who is allowed in the classroom are confronted when community partners become active participants in the education process and are given agency on the students' formation. By bridging academia and the neighborhood, questions of authority and power in knowledge and education are confronted. Education is framed in a share societal way, and becomes more of a promise of future responsibility to others and less of a pure investment in self-development and individual success.

ENDNOTES

1. Astin, Alexander W., et.al, "How Service Learning Affects Students," Higher Education 144, 2000.
2. Bernasconi, C., "From "Figure-ground" to "Figure-in-ground": Relevance and Outcomes of Critical Service-learning for the Design Field_ the Detroit Case Study", paper presented at the 108th Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, 2020.
3. Bernasconi, C., et al., "Service Learning in the Design Field: The Ripple Effect," in Proceedings from EDRA 50: Sustainable urban environments. Brooklyn, NY: Environmental Design Research Association, (eds.) Beth, A., Wener, R., Yoon, B., Rae, R. A., and Morris, J. , 2019. <https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/projects/edra-50-proceedings>
4. Butin, Dan W., "Of What Use Is It? Multiple Conceptualizations of Service Learning Within Education," Teachers College Record 105, no. 9, 2003: 1674-1692. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-9620.2003.00305.x>
5. Eby, John W., "Why Service-Learning Is Bad," Service Learning, General 27, 1998: 1-8. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/27>
6. Green, Ann E., "'But you aren't white?'" Racial perceptions and service-learning," Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning 8, no.1 (Fall), 2001: 18-26.
7. Jacoby, Barbara and Associates. Service-learning in higher education: Concepts and Practices. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1996.
8. Mitchell, Carol, and Hilton Humphries, "From notions of charity to social justice in service learning: The complex experience of communities," Journal of Education as Change 11, no.3, 2007: 47-58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16823200709487178>
9. Mitchell, Tania D., "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models," Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning 14, no.2, 2008: 50-65.
10. Mitchell, Tania D., David M. Donahue, and Courtney Young-Law, "Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Whiteness," Journal of Equity and Excellence in Education 45, no. 4, 2012: 612-629.
11. Martin, Tania, and André Casault, "Thinking the other: Toward cultural diversity in architecture," Journal of Architectural Education 59, no. 1, 2005: 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1531-314X.2005.00001.x>
12. Sigmon, Robert L., "Service-learning: Three Principles," Synergist. National Center for Service-Learning, ACTION 8, no. 1 (Spring), 1979: 9-11.
13. Rogal, Maria, "Decolonizing Graphic Design," in Proceeding of the 11th European Academy of Design Conference, 2015.
14. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. Decolonizing Methodologies. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2012.
15. Vincent, S. Cindy, Sara B. Moore, Cynthia Lynch, Jacob Lefker, and Robert J. Awkward. "Critically engaged civic learning: A comprehensive restructuring of service-learning approaches," Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning 27, no.2 (Fall), 2021: 107-129. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0027.205>