

Yestermorrow/UMass Design+Build Semester: A Decade of Work

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A decade ago, the architecture department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst partnered with the Yestermorrow Design Build School to envision and create a study-away design/build semester experience. This program has flourished since then, and the tenth anniversary year provides a logical moment for celebration and reflection. This presentation showcases the work of the past decade, and highlights the ways in which novel goals and aspirations underpin this particular collaboration.

Since its inception in 2011, the Semester Program has been envisioned as an opportunity for architecture students from professional programs to collaborate with non-designers from liberal arts programs on the design and fabrication of a tiny house. In one semester, students quickly learn how to design, represent their ideas, work

with tools and building materials, and construct a small but complex building from start to finish. This intensive experience exists in partnership with expert instructors at a seasoned design/build institution on a campus in rural Vermont, where design/build is the central ethos (Ramos 2016).

While the immersion study-away model for design/build education is not new, the Yestermorrow-UMass partnership embodies several novel characteristics that serve to highlight and expand the chief attributes of each institution (Stonorov 2017). Because the program was designed just a decade ago, it was able to opportunistically adopt characteristics from other national programs and strategically build upon the expertise of each partner organization. Programs such as the Remote Studio, the Rural Studio, the Tulane City Center



Figure 1. |Yestermorrow Campus in Vermont. Credit: Yestermorrow Design Build School.



Figure 2. Yestermorrow Semester Program Advertising. Credit: Yestermorrow Design Build School.



Figure 3. 2012 House Project. Credit: Yestermorrow Design Build School.

and the University of Washington were models for the design of this program; site visits at each campus enabled the inaugural team to better understand the pieces that were worth emulating. In addition to these existing models, the team produced a host of new physical, economic, legal, curricular, and logistical operations for the program, in ways that served to bolster both partner institutions.

Yestermorrow does the bulk of the work in this model, but it also directly benefits from this arrangement. The school is able to brand itself as a University affiliate, with instructors and credits that are managed by the larger academic institution of UMass Amherst. Yestermorrow faculty and staff actively participate in academic reviews, events and conferences, both as a means of disseminating their model and learning from other aligned institutions (Cavanagh, Hartig, and Palleroni 2014, 14) The school is able to fold the semester program into the other classes offered on the campus; growing enrollment overall but also boosting the visibility of its broader brand.

For an institution like UMass Amherst, this partnership has enabled a small but growing architecture department to establish a robust design/build offshoot with an ideologically-aligned partner organization(Clouse 2014). The program is self-sufficient and independent, requiring minimal investment from UMass Amherst in terms of space, instructor allocation and logistical challenges. The department operates under many of the legal and institutional

arrangements of Yestermorrow, eliminating the need for insurance policies and tool maintenance contracts. The rewards of this arrangement are enormous: the program provides UMass students with a standalone minor in architectural studies and exposure to design/build; it creates an architectural study-away experience for students; and it enables the department to build relationships with individuals across Universities and regions. While design/build programs often occupy outsized physical footprints in Universities because of their particular programmatic needs, this program relies upon the infrastructure already developed by Yestermorrow, requiring few additional physical resources. The study-away design/build partnership with Yestermorrow has meant that UMass doesn't need to host an on-site design/build program, while still benefitting from the extension of this curriculum in the major.

These shared roles, and the co-benefits that emerge through collaboration, address nearly all of the systemic challenges to University design/build programs outlined by Geoff Gjertson in "A House Divided" (2011). The model produced by UMass and Yestermorrow suggests an alternative path to the onsite design/build program in architectural education, while still providing opportunities for physical building efforts in the curriculum. It is a lean production, with co-benefits that emerge from creatively restructuring the traditional in-house design/build model.



Figure 4. 2011 House Project. Credit: Yestermorrow DB School.



Figure 5. 2017 Ski Hut Project. Credit: Yestermorrow DB School.



Figure 6. 2015 House Project. Credit: Yestermorrow Design Build School.



Figure 7. 2018 House Project. Credit: Yestermorrow DB School.

For instance, interdisciplinary education has become a hallmark of the program. Students, who come from the architecture department at UMass Amherst as well as from other institutions across the US, may arrive with previous experience in architecture and construction, or none at all. The curriculum is set up to be nimble: to respond opportunistically to the skills that students bring with them, and to find inroads to skill-building that work for a diverse student body. Student aptitude with sewing, or sculpture, for instance, might work into a final product. And because students learn, work, and live with each other for the entire semester, they get to know each other well. Ideas are developed over meals and through the ongoing dialogue that is a hallmark of immersive study-away experiences (MacKay-Lyons 2008).

The continued presence of Yestermorrow as a school and responsible entity is also noteworthy. Unlike study-abroad design/build interventions, in which students ultimately leave a project in the hands of community members, Yestermorrow remains an abiding presence in the region, even after the students have gone. The school routinely returns to past projects to make repairs, additions, or adjustments as needed. This responsibility to the community in which it works is crucial, and best accomplished by a long-term, embedded organization.

The Yestermorrow/UMass semester partnership is now known for its ten-year legacy of award-winning, high-performance buildings in rural Vermont. Here students gain new knowledge about



Figure 8. 2019 House Project. Credit: Yestermorrow DB School.

architectural practice through experiential learning, and hone design and fabrication skills in a collaborative pedagogical context. But what makes this partnership unique, and what has made it functional for this past decade, is the unusual organizational model that it follows. Through innovative recruitment, hiring, curriculum design, and community partnerships, the UMass/Yestermorrow Semester Program builds upon the proven capabilities of each program partner. In so doing, it has built the capacity for extraordinary design/build education, and offers an implementation model for other campuses and in other educational contexts.

ENDNOTES

1. Cavanagh, Ted, Ursula Hartig, and Sergio Palleroni, eds. 2014. *Working Out: Thinking While Building 2014 Fall ACSA Conference Proceedings*. Halifax: ACSA.
2. Clouse, Carey. 2014. "One Semester, One Tiny House." In *NCBDS 29 Proceedings: Actions: Making of Place*, edited by Eric Oskey, Dennis Playdon, and Lorena Alvarez, 149. Philadelphia: ACSA.
3. Gjertson, Geoff. 2011. "House Divided: Challenges to Design/Build from Within." In *ACSA Fall Conference Proceedings*, edited by Ikhlas Sabouni and Jorge Vanegas, 13. Houston: ACSA.
4. MacKay-Lyons, Brian. 2008. *Ghost: Building an Architectural Vision*. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
5. Ramos, Luis Enrique. 2016. "Prickly Mountain & the Design/Build Phenomenon: The Development of a H." *Architectural Studies Integrative Projects* 81. <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/archstudintproj/81/>.
6. Stonorov, Tolya, ed. 2017. *The Design-Build Studio: Crafting Meaningful Work in Architecture Education*. 1st edition. New York: Routledge.



Figure 9. 2013 House Project. Credit: Yestermorrow Design Build School.



Figure 10. Image caption. Image credit.