

# Collaborative Community Practice: Evaluating Partnerships and Pedagogy

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**Keywords:** community design, engagement, collaborative practice, design pedagogy

**University-based community design centers are unique in their position within a network of both academic and community relationships. While design centers follow different models, this paper applies an evaluative framework to one university-based community design practice that centers teaching and collaborative professional projects. This paper will unpack how the Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) operates within the School of Architecture (SOA) at the University of Detroit Mercy, offering educational opportunities for students to explore community-engaged design practice, as well as how the practice operates within a network of community partners citywide on a range of projects and with an emphasis on collaboration. This paper seeks to identify and share outcomes associated with community design practice in terms of both student and community collaborator experience through an evolving evaluative practice. The paper includes perspectives from an evaluative framework currently under development and aims to illustrate and offer initial lessons for both the learning experience and collaborative design process. Overall, this research and paper aim to draw lessons from community design practice related to both pedagogy and partnerships, and where they intersect.**

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the field of public interest design has expanded greatly, with new models for practice paving an exciting path toward a more integrated and community-engaged sector of the design field.<sup>1</sup> A number of authors focusing on the field of community design identify a range of models for practice, increasing in number and variety in recent years. Gilad Meron and Mia Scharphie effectively outline these models in their essay mapping “The Context of Community Design Practices.”<sup>2</sup> University-based community design centers offer one model for public interest design practice that has been at the forefront of the field since its inception during the Civil Rights era and the middle of the twentieth century, when the Pratt Institute Center for Community Development, the longest running community design center, was founded in the same era as the Architects’ Renewal Committee of Harlem, the first community design center, intent on harnessing resident

voice in design and planning decision-making impacting New York neighborhoods in the face of urban renewal. The Detroit Collaborative Design Center (DCDC) based at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture (SOA) was founded in 1994 and represents the next generation of community design centers, sharing a birthday with Auburn University’s Rural Studio.<sup>3</sup>

The university-based community design center model is unique in its commitment to both pedagogy and practice, working within an academic setting and contributing to the education of the next generation of public interest design practitioners while also contributing to collaborative professional projects that support local community development efforts. University-based community design centers also vary amongst themselves in terms of the balance between pedagogy and practice, student and community partner outcomes, and other spectrums outlined in Dan Pitera’s “Operational Barometer” for community design centers.<sup>4</sup> DCDC offers a model of practice that prioritizes full-time nonprofit professional practice that integrates educational opportunities in the office as well as the classroom. In the context of this framing and for the purposes of this paper, design practice is also considered both research and classroom.

## TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF COMMUNITY DESIGN

DCDC was founded in 1994 by then-Dean of the School of Architecture Stephen Vogel, FAIA.<sup>5</sup> Since then, DCDC has evolved and expanded, working alongside community partners citywide on a range of design and planning projects that prioritize participation, center resident voice in the decision-making process, and operate at the intersection of local expertise and professional knowledge. In its first twenty years, DCDC worked with nearly 200 partners on 100 projects. In the subsequent years, the work has nearly doubled, funded by both philanthropic support and fee-for-service at a nonprofit rate. DCDC is now led by a full-time year-round professional staff of six with backgrounds in architecture, urban planning, urban design, landscape architecture, agriculture, social work, and community development. Projects vary based on the ongoing efforts of community partners deeply embedded in Detroit. They range from neighborhood plans centering strategies for open space as resilience and citywide infrastructure studies that enable community co-benefits to small-scale landscapes



Figure 1. Recent project Avis & Elsmere, which resulted from a robust community workshop process with partner organization Inside Southwest Detroit in collaboration with Et al. Collaborative, and with significant contributions from coop student designers.

for gathering and play as well as architectural renovations for youth-driven programs. Meaningful community engagement is central to DCDC's model of practice, as is working in close partnership with community groups and nonprofit organizations who hold relationships and trust in the communities with which DCDC works.

Educating the next generation of community design practitioners is also central to the history and present day practice of DCDC. DCDC staff teach part time in the architecture and community development programs at the university and students work full time alongside professional staff on a semester-by-semester basis through a paid cooperative education model. Both practice and teaching are detailed further below.

### **COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY**

More often than not, DCDC is invited to participate in a project by a local community group or nonprofit seeking design services that prioritize community engagement in the process. DCDC works with community partners to define a community-engaged design process that ensures a variety of community perspectives and voices are integrated into design development. This takes the form of a range of engagement activities that vary from traditional meeting formats to less conventional engagement methods that aim to reach residents where they are at and make it easy to participate in the midst of the demands of everyday life. Engagement strategies range from visual surveys and focus groups to intercept activities and pop-up activation events. Often, the community-engaged design process will focus on a series of community workshops that center the diverse perspectives of a group of representative community members in the design process. Throughout all engagement methods, DCDC seeks to invite a variety of people into the process and, in turn, make sure their participation is meaningfully integrated into design outcomes with an ongoing feedback loop to demonstrate how "what we've heard" drives decision-making. These engagement strategies are

central in DCDC's efforts to further develop evaluation methods throughout the practice.

Many projects include a wide array of partners. Is it important to note that the community organizations who are technically "clients" are considered partners in the work. Other partners may include representatives from a range of disciplines depending on the project, as well as other important community and civic leaders. Often, DCDC will lead community-engaged conceptual design and planning and partner with another design office for subsequent design phases. Developing an intentional collaborative working model is important to DCDC's practice and projects, and marks another opportunity for evaluation. For an in depth look at a center project in collaboration with high schoolers and community leaders in northeast Detroit, see Barbara Brown Wilson's chapter on Denby and the Skinner Playfield in her book *Resilience for All: Striving for Equity Through Community-Driven Design*.<sup>6</sup>

### **STRUCTURES FOR TEACHING COMMUNITY DESIGN**

DCDC is housed in the School of Architecture (SOA) and integrates with the curriculum and educating emerging community designers via three main avenues: a cooperative (coop) education experience, a required upper level Public Interest Design Studio, and the Master of Community Development program.

The SOA requires a two-semester full-time paid field experience as part of the curriculum, by which students gain real world experience working in architecture firms throughout the region. DCDC hosts two-to-four coop students every semester.<sup>7</sup> During their time with DCDC, students are exposed to a wide variety of community design practice skills and experiences, including engagement processes, design development, graphic communication and more. They are introduced to community partners and play an essential role in terms of both implementing engagement and generating design deliverables. This experience, often likened to a teaching hospital, embeds students in the university-based community design



Figure 2. DCDC leads a youth design engagement activity.

center as they learn by doing, experiencing public interest design practice first hand by working alongside supervising full-time staff.

DCDC staff also teach in the SOA curriculum as adjunct instructors and via the author's Professor of Practice faculty position. Coursework primarily takes the form of a required Public Interest Design Studio for third and fourth year undergraduate students. In this studio, students embark on a studio project rooted in a Detroit neighborhood and informed by community perspectives, which range given the context of the studio. Students learn key community design skills such as active listening to community feedback and how to integrate that feedback into the design development process. Beyond studio, there is also an ongoing commitment to integrate public interest design further within the curriculum and create more collaborative opportunities between DCDC and the architecture and community development programs. Finally, center staff also teach and play leadership roles in the SOA's Master of Community Development (MCD) program, particularly in courses focused on physical development and community engagement, further integrating center work and research into the cross-disciplinary curriculum

## EVALUATING COMMUNITY DESIGN PRACTICE AND TEACHING

Understanding the impact and efficacy of DCDC's teaching and practice is essential to continued growth and improved support for our partners and students. DCDC is in the process of

expanding an evaluative framework that includes assessment across the practice including: community partner experience, collaborative team processes, community engagement methods, the coop experience, and related coursework. The holistic evaluation approach also applies to internal functions, including staff performance and goal setting.

This framework builds upon a trajectory of evaluation within the community design field, a conversation that has largely led with the SEED (Social Economic Environmental Design) methodology and evaluator. Bryan Bell and Lisa Abendroth spell out an assessment framing in their *Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook*, including project benchmarks, defining goals and other evaluation methods.<sup>8</sup> The SEED method of evaluation offers several helpful framing questions that ground community-engaged design practice. It is also important to note the work by several philanthropic foundations and peers on the topic of equitable evaluation in creative placemaking and beyond.<sup>9</sup> This movement in part asks how evaluation frameworks can undue power structures that privilege the evaluator perspective and in turn do more to support the on-the-ground work of community partners through the evaluative process. As DCDC expands how evaluation is folded into practice, the question of how to support community partners through the process is critical and informs the development of evaluative tools.

While DCDC's evaluative framework is still under development, a number of evaluation practices in teaching and practice are already integrated or have been piloted and are detailed here, along with a summary of key takeaways. Evaluation of engagement methods is folded into various participatory design activities, with one example included and discussed below. Additionally, a process feedback form for community partners has been developed, with limited returns at the time of writing. However, major outcomes from a partner survey recently administered as part of a strategic planning effort within DCDC are included. Existing feedback mechanisms for teaching include pilot interviews with alumni of the coop experience and alumni of the Public Interest Design Studio, integration of mid- and end-of-semester check in conversations with coop students, and robust teaching evaluations that supplement university-issued course evaluations.

### *Evaluating Engagement Activities*

DCDC folds opportunities for feedback into participatory design and planning activities and is in the process of developing a consistent feedback mechanism that can be tailored to each unique project context and community. In a recent project, DCDC supported several partners engaging throughout the development of a new cradle-to-career campus, which included an extensive set of engagement activities ranging from large town hall meetings and targeted focus groups to conversations at local "hot spots" and engaging with high school students in the classroom. The image included here

# After the meeting...

Do you feel that you are updated on the P-20 Cradle-to-Career Campus initiative?

Yes       No

What questions do you have?

Mark on the arrow if your confidence has increased or decreased regarding this initiative after the meeting?

Mark your feeling about this initiative on the arrow below.



Figure 3. One engagement activity evaluation tool in the form of an exit survey deployed at the conclusion of a town hall community meeting.

provides one example of an evaluation strategy developed for a town hall style community meeting with topical break out conversations comprised of an entry and exit survey. Results collected indicated a number of findings that informed subsequent engagement efforts and reflected on the efficacy of the meeting itself, along the lines of:

- Most people are already acquainted with the initiative;
- The vast majority felt they learned more about the initiative through the course of the engagement activity;
- Most participants felt positively about the initiative with key associations including phrases such as “community involvement,” “a holistic approach to teaching and learning,” and more.

The evaluation of engagement strategies aims to better understand how well such activities meet engagement goals. In the context of this project, engagement goals developed with project partners were identified at the outset: build trust between Marygrove partners and the community; develop and nurture a long-standing, robust community dialogue; involve stakeholders in the process of knowledge sharing to inform and shape programs that reflects stakeholders’ priorities in the implementation phase; build a coalition of residents and district stakeholders who will help communicate the Marygrove Campus vision to the community; inform a governance structure that empowers shared decision making and ensures all campus partners are held accountable to keep residents’ concerns as a priority in long-term planning; and develop a clear

feedback loop that demonstrates how community voices have been integrated into the process.<sup>10</sup>

Evaluation of engagement strategies also seeks to ascertain how such activities move beyond standard public practice minimums to meaningfully drive design decision-making and ensure that participants maintain a sense of ownership in the design and planning process. As articulated in the introduction to *Design as Democracy: Techniques for Collective Creativity*, “[f]or participatory design to be truly democratic, it cannot remain a standardized public process.”<sup>11</sup>

### Partner Feedback Informing Process and Outcomes

DCDC recently developed an evaluation tool for community partner feedback that is currently being piloted. The initial tool seeks responses at the conclusion of a project regarding engagement processes and goals, collaboration between DCDC and the partner, and design and planning outcomes. DCDC is also seeking input on how evaluation tools can best support community partner efforts, as well as feedback on the evaluation itself. Similarly under development, DCDC is working on a method to generate informative feedback in the equitable and effective facilitation of collaborative team structures, which is increasingly common in DCDC’s process and projects.<sup>12</sup>

Recent steps toward evaluating the impact and perception of DCDC’s work were included in a 2019 strategic planning

survey of a variety of DCDC partners that yielded instructive feedback and helped launch this evaluative journey. Questions pertained to what DCDC does well, areas for improvement, key associations with DCDC's work, gaps in service, mission alignment, areas of service, opportunities, challenges and programmatic priorities. Results were extensive. Key themes were distilled from this process, documented by the strategic planning consultant and are summarized below, offering essential lessons as DCDC enters a new chapter.

- DCDC exceeds with engagement and outreach. It is viewed favorably when it comes to working and engaging with neighborhoods and “actively listening” to residents and partners.
- DCDC plays a critical role based on its unique ability to capture community vision and then translate and match architectural concepts that align and embody a neighborhood's vision.
- DCDC is seen as a leader when it comes to community driven design, however, there is an interest for DCDC to do more when it comes to uplifting why community design is important with developers and residents.
- DCDC is seen as a thought partner in several spaces, however the relationship with the university should be more clear with more opportunities for integration for students and recent graduates.
- DCDC has a voice in the community and needs to be present at the table while discussing local issues and helping with coming up with solutions. There is opportunity to educate the broader community and build relationships to increase awareness.<sup>13</sup>

New partner evaluation norms will allow DCDC to build upon this feedback and grow our practice and collaborative processes.

### *Evaluating the Student Experience*

While teaching evaluations offer a valuable form of direction, particularly when supplemented by course-specific feedback, DCDC is also focused on understanding the longer term impact of the coop experience and Public Interest Design (PID) Studio. Anecdotally, midterm and end-of-semester check-ins reveal that coop student designers at DCDC find pride in their work, learn new skills through their contributions to design deliverables, and value meeting with community partners and participating in the engagement process as a unique aspect of practice.

A more robust recent effort to better understand student impact took the form of written interviews with a limited number of alumni of the coop program and PID Studio. Interview questions focused on: perceptions of the learning experience; personal outcomes; the role of designers and community developers; design decision-making and project drivers; roles as citizens and future career plans.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the coop experience at DCDC, alumni interviews indicated the following high level outcomes:

- Understanding of the holistic nature and broad impact of community-engaged design practice;
- Increased value of communication skills in a community context including listening and representing design ideas;
- Appreciation for designing with and for a diverse range of people and responding to community needs as a driver; and
- Impact on how students perceive their career decisions and contribute to their multiple communities.

Additionally, the interview format led to illustrative quotes including the following: “[a]s designers we should listen to the voice of the community, first and foremost... the key is what we do with this information and how it translates to the built environment” and “[t]he DCDC coop experience is relevant for designers because it teaches them to listen, observe, and provide strategies to help imagine possibilities beyond those that are immediately evident in a given situation.”

Alumni outcomes tied to participation in the PID Studio included: appreciation of comprehensive design strategy; value of community expertise and role in design process; recognition of role of architect as both citizen and agent of change; impact on academic/career trajectory focused on public interest; and an understanding of the impact design can have on a community. Testimonials include:

- “It pushed us out of our comfort zone from just sitting in the studio and theorizing about what the community might like to actually getting out and talking with them.”
- “The studio gave students the tools to look at the larger context when looking at a project... who will be using the space and be benefitted by it, and what the space will mean to the next door neighbor, the neighborhood, and the city.”
- “It was a powerful experience that made students feel like they could have an impact on their surroundings and their community.”

These outcomes are clearly validating and also instrumental in how DCDC frames and evolves its teaching practice. However, this is a precursor to a more robust and extensive effort to generate feedback from a more exhaustive set of alumni who have participated in the coop program and related coursework. Future evaluation goals include gaining an understanding of the impact of DCDC's teaching practices on student trajectories as well as cumulative impacts in the field.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY DESIGN PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY**

DCDC aims to further develop a robust evaluative framework to better understand and improve upon its approach to educating designers, practicing community-engaged design, and operating in collaboration with partners. The activities

included above offer first steps toward developing a comprehensive evaluation practice that can better inform DCDC as well as like-minded programs nationwide. Initial outcomes from these early evaluative iterations reveal:

- Participant outcomes related to specific engagement activities, offering lessons by which to evaluate longer term engagement processes as well as the impact of specific activities;
- A critical assessment of how community partners perceive the collective work of DCDC, informing opportunities for DCDC to both expand and focus; and
- Student perspectives on the longer term impact of community-engaged design education opportunities in both the office and the classroom.

In addition to assessing DCDC's various educational capacities, collaborative structures, and engagement processes, a holistic evaluative framework will also seek to learn from where such areas of practice intersect. Key considerations moving forward include the importance of defining evaluation goals that correspond with goals for each area of practice being evaluated. Furthermore, evaluation tools must be both adaptable to different contexts and also replicable for integration into day-to-day operations. Evaluation tools must also enable participation and reach a wide variety of voices. Finally, evaluation systems must result in findings that offer opportunities to reflect upon and fold into the practice in a meaningful way. This framing seeks to integrate principles of community engagement central to DCDC's work. A post-occupancy evaluation for community design is another point of future development that is essential to documenting and learning from this work. Ultimately, future work along these lines will support the ongoing deepening of community-engaged practice and pedagogy in an effort to further expand the public interest design field and continue to offer new models of practice.

## ENDNOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper, "public interest design" and "community design" are used interchangeably.
2. Gilad Meron and Mia Scharphie, "The Context of Community Design Practice," *Activist Architecture: Philosophy & Practice of the Community Design Center*, eds. Dan Pitera and Craig L. Wilkins (University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, 2015), 11-18.
3. For an effective and concise background on community design centers, see: Emily Taylor Welty, "Refining Process Expanding Practice: Public Interest Design Fieldnotes from the South," *ACSA National Conference Proceedings, The Ethical Imperative, 2017* and Barbara Brown Wilson, *Resilience for All: Striving for Equity Through Community-Driven Design* (Washington: Island Press, 2018).
4. Dan Pitera, "The Activity of Activism: A field Guide for Establishing a Design Center," *Activist Architecture: Philosophy & Practice of the Community Design Center*, eds. Dan Pitera and Craig L. Wilkins (University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, 2015), 74-96.
5. For more information the origins of community design centers see: Stephen Vogel, "The Foundations of Community Design Centers," *Activist Architecture: Philosophy & Practice of the Community Design Center*, eds. Dan Pitera and Craig L. Wilkins (University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, 2015), 64-72.
6. Brown Wilson, 105-136.
7. This cooperative education experience is included as a case study in: Bryan Bell and Lisa Abendroth, eds. *Public Interest Design Education Guidebook: Curricula, Strategies, and SEED Academic Case Studies* (New

York: Routledge, 2019), 248-253. The cooperative education experience can also be found on the SOA website: <https://architecture.udmercy.edu/practice-ready.php>

8. SEED is detailed in: Bryan Bell and Lisa Abendroth, eds. *Public Interest Design Practice Guidebook: SEED Academic Methodology, Case Studies and Critical Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2016). More information is available online: <https://seednetwork.org/>
9. This work is defined by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (<https://www.equitableeval.org/>) and central to the work of Professor Maria Rosario Jackson, discussed in part in "Creative Placemaking: Rethinking Neighborhood Change and Tracking Progress," The Kresge Foundation (2019). This topic has also been the focus of conversation between the author and foundation evaluation staff.
10. For more information on the engagement process for the P-20 Cradle-to-Career Campus at Marygrove see: <https://marygroveconservancy.org/stay-engaged/community-engagement/>
11. David de la Pena, et al. eds. *Design as Democracy: Techniques for Collective Creativity* (Washington: Island Press, 2017). See this text for a broader discussion of effective and creative community engagement techniques, which are likewise central to the center's work and detailed elsewhere. A holistic approach to evaluating community engagement is also detailed in the compelling Master of Community Development capstone project workbook created by Madhavi Reddy, et al. and entitled "Am I Doing this Right?: A guide to assess four community engagement work" (2017).
12. For an in depth guidebook to collaborative leadership, teams, and practice see: Erin Carraher and Ryan Smith, *Leading Collaborative Architectural Practice* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2017).
13. This strategic planning work was completed with the support of NEW Solutions for Nonprofits.
14. These interviews and outcomes were first shared at the 51st Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association, Group Presentation Abstract authored with Claudia Bernasconi and Virginia Stanard, "Value-based Education: A case for biased pedagogies and practices in Detroit" (2020).