Considering the Ethics and Practices of Educational DesignBuild in Native American Societies: An Anthropologist's Perspective

NATHAN PAUL JONES
University of Colorado Boulder, Program in Environmental Design

Keywords: designbuild, ethics, curriculum, architecture, anthropology.

This paper represents a cultural anthropologist's approach to examining architecture projects undertaken in Native American communities through the efforts of architectural university design-build programs to provide housing. I investigate how architectural faculty have employed ethics in their curricula and their students have interacted with Native communities while executing design-builds. I focus on the DesignBuildBLUFF program taking place in the Utah side of the Navajo Nation and the Native American Sustainable Housing Initiative that was active in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. This paper represents a point of departure for a broader research project that considers the cultural preparation and community engagement techniques utilized for interacting with and designing and building for Native Americans. A conclusion I draw from my data is that design-build studio instructors may incorporate strategies from the "first project" model practiced in the dissertation process in cultural anthropology into their studios to help manage ethical concerns with undertaking design-build programs in underserved and underrepresented communities.

INTRODUCTION

On November 17, 2021, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) formally apologized for the discipline's role in inflicting harm on Indigenous societies in the Americas. The apology recognized anthropology's role in the exploitation of Indigenous communities, identities, and cultures, and the harms caused by its extractive research.[1] Since the publication of the apology, other anthropologists have recognized the discipline's legacy of participation in racist ideologies, improperly appropriating Native cultural knowledge, and removing material objects and human remains that belonged to Native peoples on the behalf of scientific research. Reactions to the AAA's apology reflect a much larger social justice rectification inside some academic institutions and professional associations. Correcting this course, across academic and professional disciplines, requires moving to more collaborative, reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous societies, suggesting a recalibration of methods

from professional practice to academic curricula revision for the purpose of empowering them.[2]

Taking a similar position as the AAA, but in the context of architecture, Tammy Eagle Bull, representing the American Institute of Architects (AIA), has written that non-Native architects have undertaken design projects in reservations with little to no understanding of indigenous cultural values resulting in buildings that have not served the needs of the Native communities for which they were designed. Eagle Bull suggests that Native culture is a primary element for consideration among designers working with Native communities in order "to understand how to design buildings that fit in that world." Close collaboration with tribal members as well as carefully identifying how to ask questions of Natives in an appropriate and respectful manner are especially key practices within indigenous spaces for professional and academic design practitioners.[3]

This paper represents a point of departure in considering the pedagogy of design education in terms of the preparation and execution that North American architecture students experience through the design and construction of design-build happening in unfamiliar and perhaps underserved cultural communities. In the long term, I plan to propel this preliminary study into an extensive ethnographic research project that examines architectural pedagogies for design and construction taking place in Native American reservations. The current focus of the project is an ethnography of design-build programs, focusing on their instructors, students, and curricula. For this initial stage of the project, I have gathered academic literature about educational design-build studios directed at underrepresented communities, identified active and past design-build programs operating in Native American reservations, and met with two former studio instructors (and one former student). Following this preliminary stage, my intent is to undertake extensive research involving a larger group of design-build studio instructors, current and former students, and the Natives interacting with the projects.

I examine two programs prioritizing housing for their indigenous clients – Design-BuildBluff, practicing in and around the Navajo Nation in Utah, and the Native American Sustainable Housing Initiative, operating in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in

Figure 1. Rob Pyatt.

South Dakota. In addition to my investigation of the design-build programs, including the experiences and practices of their instructors and students, a later site of ethnographic inquiry will be the reservations themselves where the build phase of the studios happens. I posit in the conclusion that the design-build studio experience closely resembles how fieldwork emerges and is performed in the anthropological academic dissertation project from which design-build pedagogy may draw methodological inspiration (an idea to be thoroughly addressed as a dimension of my larger research agenda).

THE PROGRAMS

Utah architect, Hank Lewis established Design-BuildBluff in 2000 with the aim to separate students from their familiar surroundings and immerse them in a practical cultural experience providing material benefit to the Navajo community of San Juan County, Utah. On an annual basis the program offers the opportunity for up to sixteen master of architecture students to collectively design a single-family home for a pre-selected recipient from the Utah quadrant of the Navajo Nation.[4] The program has stayed consistent in terms of production over the years but has experienced transition in institutional management as faculty leadership has oscillated from the University of Colorado to the University of Utah, and most recently to the Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Vermont.

Rob Pyatt established the Native American Sustainable Housing Project (NASHI) while working as a senior instructor for the Program in Environmental Design at CU-Boulder. A program that Pyatt identifies as "project-based service learning," likewise focused on affordable housing for Native American communities for the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of the Oglala Sioux Tribe from 2011 to 2014. As part of a yearly undergraduate architectural curriculum, environmental design students took courses in architectural design, indigenous studies, sustainable construction, and cultural immersion taking place both on campus in Boulder in the spring semester and on the Oglala Lakota

College in South Dakota over the summer. Following the studio and conceptual course work, the Colorado students participated in building sustainable housing in the Pine Ridge Reservation that reflected their studio designs.[5]

PEDAGOGIES: DESIGNBUILD AND THE CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY DISSERTATION

Although professional and educational design-build at the conceptual and practical levels are likely quite commonplace to an audience of architectural educators and practitioners, I offer clear definitions at this juncture to make a comparative point between the pedagogical processes of design-build and anthropological dissertation projects. A "design-build" project implies a delivery method in which a team of specialists (architects, engineers, builders) work under a single contract to provide design and construction services for a client.[6] To distinguish between the professional and educational approaches to design-build, Chad Kraus suggests a sharp semantic contrast between "design-build" as a signifier for the professional services delivery method and "designbuild" as a strictly pedagogical exercise and an experience that maintains the unique qualities of a design educational practice.[7]

As an alternative to the standard academic architectural studio, designbuild education enlists students to realize architectural projects at full scale. Such projects are relatively modest in terms of their size and infrastructural complexity, but they typically require students to engage with the stake holders and elements of design and construction, including clients, engineers, contractors, budgets, and materials. In its ideal orchestration, a designbuild curriculum differs from the traditional studio experience in that the project design is targeted to a real project and follows the full arc of project delivery, versus the hypothetical nature of standard studio projects. Designbuild education usually involves student collaboration with peers and a wide spectrum of external stakeholders in the design and construction of the built environment.[8] The execution of these ideals vary wildly across

Figure 2. Rob Pyatt.

designbuild programs dependent upon institutional policies, instructor experience, project longevity, community relations, and community reception (among other factors).

A portion of my intent with the introductory discussion of anthropology's critical reflexivity regarding its engagement with Native American societies was to foreshadow a discussion of cultural anthropology's pedagogy for training graduate students for an ethnographic dissertation project. Having traversed the world of dissertation research and writing in cultural anthropology at the doctorate level, it occurs to me that designbuild pedagogy in its many varieties closely resembles the process of anthropology dissertation fieldwork (or what George Marcus calls "first fieldwork" in cultural anthropology) in those cases in which designbuild is directed at communities that are significantly separated geographically from the university.[9] Similar in nature to anthropology doctoral candidates assembling an ethnographic dissertation project, designbuild students express interest in working among a society that is not usually local for the student (although there are exceptions) by opting into the designbuild course or program. Students also undergo a period of preparation for engagement with the community and then experience a relocation to that community with which they interact. Students immersed in both pedagogical environments (designbuild or dissertation project) subsequently produce creative deliverables resulting from their preliminary preparatory work and interactions with the community. I return to this idea below following an examination of academic and Native American critiques of designbuild programs operating in underserved and underrepresented communities.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF DESIGNBUILD: ACADEMIC AND NATIVE AMERICAN CRTIQUES

Working exclusively in a low income, mostly black community in rural Alabama, Auburn University's Rural Studio has served as a template for many designbuild programs undertaking projects among populations with similar economic and cultural demographics. In spite of its broad influence, Rural Studio has experienced a substantial critique underlying a host of concerns for the ethical implications of designbuild, especially among communities with differing cultures, economic resources, and levels of technical expertise from those stewarding the projects. Rural Studio's critics have expressed concerns about the power relations implicit in its projects, representations depicting its rural, low-income clients, experimentation on vulnerable populations with untested building materials and practices, and the privilege of using a community as an object of education for students who are attempting to professionalize themselves.[10] The critique of Rural Studio demonstrates a general unease about designbuild pedagogy and practice, specifically when executed in underserved populations. Designbuild has also been under scrutiny from Native American architects, design academics, and others involved or familiar with reservation-based projects.

Returning to Eagle Bull's "key practices" that I identify above as necessary practices for designers working with Native communities in mind, there are indeed excellent examples of architectural and design professionals, particularly in the area of designbuild, engaged in the kind of culturally sensitive practice and engagement that Tammy Eagle Bull invites.[11] Yet, even work directed with cultural sensitivities and understandings has struggled to escape the design sensibilities deeply embedded in western modernity that have arisen in Native American lands through centuries of European colonial possession. Eagle Bull argues non-Native designers often have full control over how they devise, employ, and represent design projects due to the compromises that indigenous authorities must make to get building projects completed with the financial (and possibly other) constraints to which they are subject. These limitations within the power dynamics of the design and building in indigenous spaces suggest a need to provision Native Americans with a heightened authority over the process and how it is authored.

Eagle Bull explains that when communities among the Ogalala Sioux consider building projects, the decisions involve everyone and not just those with authority directly responsible for the project. Any building constructed in the reservation will likely impact daily life for every member of the community, and the infinite indigenous values implicit in reservation buildings are often in direct competition with the short-term processes and logics of market capitalism dominating contemporary architecture. According to Eagle Bull, the design and construction of a new building in tribal communities is usually an infrequent occurrence, given the challenges with obtaining funding that often require a great deal of time. Therefore, when funding is awarded, tribal members fear the possibility of the investment being suddenly removed causing building projects to be rushed through the design phase (or often a project stripped of design entirely). The outcome is often inadequate design or the reliance on cheap modular, prefabricated buildings that do not meet community cultural and material needs.[12]

Figure 3.Rob Pyatt.

The question of architectural practice in subordinated societies is an important one, particularly in the context of design education. According to Anne-Marie Willis, "Conventional discipline-based design education cannot contribute to substantial change unless students are inducted into understanding theories of power, social structure and social change, and the like."[13] In their reflexive critique of the Design-BuildBluff program operating within the University of Utah's School of Architecture and Planning, Yusaf and Galarza point out that in spite of its altruistic efforts and accomplishments, the achievement of educational programs, such as Design-BuildBluff, run the risk of celebrating the asymmetries of power that underpin its successes.[14] This asymmetry exists largely due to the nature of the interface between "one of the poorest, most exploited, and discredited communities in the U.S., and the representatives of the American Academy, one of the most forceful cultural institutions of its day." The result is an inherently uneven playing field, freed from building codes and inspectors in which Native American land becomes a laboratory for affordable experiments on pedagogy and innovative architecture that may not be possible outside of the reservation.

Yusaf and Galarza argue that the experience of Design-BuildBluff leaves the practitioners and their students representing their labor in a charitable light as a service to disadvantaged communities unable to afford a professional architect. These parties remain oblivious to their privileged institutional position and the generosity of the indigenous people who permit them to experiment with architectural design – a practice that clearly misses the spirit of the Native built environment but is meant for the real estate market for which the participating students have been trained. In contrast, Yusaf and Galarza suggest consideration for how such interventions, even when welcomed, represent an extension of Western modernity that have offset historic justice by destroying indigenous architecture in terms of Native American cosmologies, social codes, and community production.[15]

These power differentials enforce an extractive dimension inherent in the process of designbuild targeted at the underserved and underrepresented. Certainly, a beneficial exchange often transpires for the Native American clients through the reception of a designed and built home. Yet, simultaneously, methodologies and materials are tested, awards are won, professionalized design and construction training is accomplished, all in the name of service to the indigenous subjects who have little to no control over the process and its outcomes. I am interested in the extent to which design students preparing to work with underserved and underrepresented communities on architectural and building projects are trained in these patterns of power. In what follows, I examine approaches to employing ethics in the curriculum I have gleaned generally from the community of designbuild
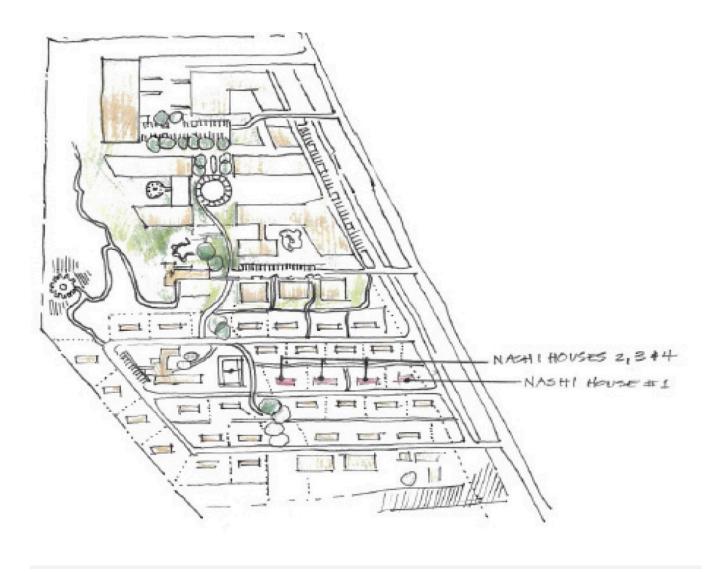
Figure 4. Image caption. Image credit.

educators and then cite specific examples emerging from NASHI and DesignBuildBluff.

ETHICS AND THE DEISGNBUILD CURRICULUM

A perusal of some of the literature on designbuild education yields discussion of various ethical considerations employed in pedagogies, but with few consistent practices existing between them. Some ethical interventions I have identified include the participation of a local, community-based non-profit organization to offer oversight, undertaking a portion of the meetings on the client's "home turf" meaning in the office of a local organization or at the dinner table of the family receiving the infrastructure,[16] and collaborations with local architecture firms and contractors so as to not create unfair competition with the professional community.[17] Additional perspectives stress the importance of flexibility and the ability to change course as a response to community dynamics[18] and placing an emphasis on addressing the precise housing challenges experienced in

impoverished communities.[19] Ethical practices that arise more consistently across designbuild programs include strategies for community engagement, such as training in local cultures and histories, collaboration and participation with local community members, maintaining a presence in the community after the project completion, and effectively managing mistakes.[20]

Among the educators operating in DesignBuildBluff and NASHI with whom I spoke, their faculty leaders developed several novel approaches to navigate ethical concerns while running their respective designbuild programs. Speaking to the power differential existing between the visiting student designers and host communities and the priority of meeting the needs of their indigenous clients, Rob Pyatt and Janna Ferguson (who served as Pyatt's teaching assistant for NASHI) identified rigorous community engagement, the cultivation of community partnerships, intensive cultural training, and the creation of even playing fields among the student participants. Curricular strategies involved

extensive study of Native American culture and history with the incorporation of a required course in Indigenous studies before students located to the build site in Pine Ridge. Upon arrival in South Dakota during the summer construction period, Colorado students took an additional cultural immersion course.[21] Pyatt also mentioned in our conversation that before the Colorado students travelled to Pine Ridge, Native students from the Oglala Lakota Tribal College and South Dakota School of Mines travelled to Boulder for a week to take part in the related design studio. Pyatt and Ferguson argued that all these components not only informed the non-Native students but created a cohesive community with a common mission tied to their affordable housing projects.[22]

Erik Sommerfeld from the University of Colorado Denver managed eight projects during DesignBuildBluff's infancy years, and he took a slightly different approach to embedding ethics into the program's studio curriculum. As his experience grew with the Navajo community, Sommerfeld honed his pedagogical approach both in managing student design and building but also with how he prepared them to spend time in the community. When training the students to spend an entire semester in Bluff, Sommerfeld would take them on a reconnaissance trip to inspect the building site and meet members of the local community. In partnership with a specialist in Navajo culture, Sommerfeld organized video conferences in which students were instructed in cultural priorities and practices present among the Navajos (and their expectations for non-Native visitors to the reservation). Upon arriving to Bluff, the students received extensive cultural etiquette training with the proprietors of the DesignBuildBluff campus, Hiroko and Atsushi Yamamoto.[23]

INCORPORATING "FIRST FIELDWORK" IN THE DESIGNBUILD STUDIO CURRICULUM

In consideration of these curricular approaches to address the challenges with designbuild generally, it occurs to me that many of the ethical strategies I have cataloged above could be consolidated into a model resembling the process by which ethnographic fieldwork emerges in the anthropological dissertation project as preparation "here to go elsewhere, or 'over there'."[24] Of course, dissertation projects in cultural anthropology (or what George Marcus calls "first fieldwork") are extensive processes that require years of preparation and execution. Preparation includes coursework, faculty advisor mentorship, textual research, ethnographic research methods training, site reconnaissance visits, and of course the actual fieldwork in which the graduate student lives at the site for approximately one year undertaking participant observation (among other ethnographic methods). Following these efforts is a period of research write up and dissertation defense.[25]

Tobias Rees identifies the merits of the design studio model as a possible training space for anthropology doctoral students to be taught "how to anthropologize all of the information that they have assembled on their particular topic before they actually

begin fieldwork." A process of iteration (as is common in the design studio) might render palpable the significance of the ethnographic toolkit, so that the student would be equipped with a certain anthropological sensibility while in the field. Rees directs our attention to the typical lack of design sensibility in the composition of anthropological dissertation research projects and how the iterative logic happening in the architectural design studio might facilitate the careful emergence of an ethnographic project through a "design of research approach."[26]

My assertion in this paper, however, is that incorporating the steps of the "first fieldwork" process common to anthropological dissertation projects in designbuild programs may organically pull together many of the ethical practices that arise in various curricula for those programs directed at underserved and underrepresented communities. I am proposing here that the studio environment Rees suggests for first fieldwork may be employed into the designbuild curriculum to anthropologize information in the architectural studio environment and thereby equip students with anthropological sensibility while working on the build site.

It appears that in many cases, designbuild studios require one academic year extending from the outset of studio design to the build completion at the work site. The anthropologizing of the process within the yearly academic calendar might include study of relevant cultures and cultural histories as part of the studio curriculum rather than adjacent to it (with "elective" culture or history courses offered outside the context of the studio). Training students in ethnographic methods in studio (especially participant observation) represents a useful component for effectively engaging and listening to locals needs and concerns. In preparation for preliminary visits to the build site (reconnaissance trips), students might submit annotated bibliographies as a studio assignment that demonstrate their cultural knowledge and can be connected to their design projects and referenced during juries. Studio instructors may require students to undertake preparatory literature reviews in the summer before the designbuild academic year to inform their bibliographies. Of course, the practicality of such practices requires testing in studio environments, participant observation and conversation with students, and a careful analysis of curricula – undertakings I plan to employ with colleagues in EVND over the coming semesters.

There is still a great deal to learn about designbuild curricular challenges and approaches but also the reception of them in the communities hosting the project sites. Until now, my research has focused on a limited sample of designbuild practitioners, which needs to significantly broaden. The study also clearly requires an indigenous voice incorporating the perspectives of community members receiving designbuild infrastructure. In the coming months, I plan to develop an ethnographic research agenda that incorporates institutional funding for an ethnography in the actual Native American spaces where designbuild projects have been undertaken or are ongoing. Perhaps, through

ENDNOTES

1. "AAA Apology to the Indigenous Community," American Anthropological Association, accessed June 13, 2023, https://americananthro.org/advocacy-statements/apology-to-the-indigenous-community/.

2. Rachel Parsons, "Anthropology Association Apologizes to Native Americans for the Field's Legacy of Harm," Scientific American, accessed June 15, 2023, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/anthropology-association-apolo-gizes-to-native-americans-for-the-fields-legacy-of-harm/.

3. "Tammy Eagle Bull, FAIA," American Institute of Architects, accessed May 29, 2023, https://www.aia.org/showcases/146181-tammy-eagle-bull-faia.

4. Shundana Yusaf and Jose Galarza, "Taking the Pulse of Bluff," In Working Out: Thinking While Building, 237-43, 2014. https://www.acsa-arch.org/chapter/taking-the-pulse-of-bluff/.2023. https://www.acsa-arch.org/chapter/taking-the-pulse-of-bluff/

5. Rob Pyatt, et al, "Pedagogy into Practice: Teaching Environmental Design Through the Native American Sustainable Housing Initiative," in Putting the Local in Global Education, eds. Neal Sobania (New York: Routledge, 2015), 137-53.

6. "What is Design-Build," Design-Build Institute of America Rocky Mountain Region, accessed September 12, 2023, https://www.dbiarockymountain.org/what_is_design_build.php.

7. Chad Kraus, "Hands on, Minds On: Motivations of the Design Build Educator," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1-16. Following Kraus's lead, I refer to the educational practice as "designbuild" from this point forward to distinguish from the professional practice of "design-build."

8. Claire Nicholas and Arlene Oak, "Make and Break Details: The Architecture of Design-Build Education," Design Studies 66, (2020): 35-53.

9. George Marcus, "Notes Toward and Ethnographic Memoir of Supervising Ethnographic Research through Anthropology's Decades of Transformation," in Fieldwork is Not What it Used to Be: Learning Anthropology's Method in a Time of Transition, eds. James Faubion and George Marcus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 1-32.

10. Anna Goodman, "The Paradox of Representation and Practice in the Auburn University Rural Studio," Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review 25, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 39-52; Patricio del Real, "Ye Shall Receive": The Rural Studio and the Gift of Architecture," Journal of Architectural Education 62, No. 4 (April 2009): 122-26; Paul Jones and Kenton Card, "Constructing 'Social Architecture': The Politics of Representing Practice," Architectural Theory Review 16, No. 3 (December 2011): 228-44; C. Greig Crysler, "The Paradoxes of Design Activism: Expertise, Scale, and Exchange, Part Two: Scale," Field: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism 10 (Spring 2018). https://field-journal.com/issue-10/the-paradoxes-of-design-activism-expertise-scale-and-exchange-part-two-scale.

11. Examples include Design-BuildBluff at the University of Utah School of Architecture and Planning, the Native American Stable Housing Initiative (NASHI) at the University of Colorado Boulder Program in Environmental Design, and the University of Notre Dame's School of Architecture St. Michael's Indian School Project.

12. Tammy Eagle Bull, "Designing to Express Community Values: A New Community School in South Dakota," in Our Voices: Indigeneity and Architecture, eds. Rebecca Kiddle luugigyoo patrick steward, and Kevin O'Brien (Novato, CA: ORO Editions, 2018),

13. Anne Marie Willis, "Transition Design: The Need to Refuse Discipline and Transcend Instrumentalism," Design Philosophy 13, no.1 (January 2016): 69-74.

14. Shundana Yusaf and Jose Galarza, "Taking the Pulse of Bluff," In Working Out: Thinking While Building, 237-43, 2014. https://www.acsa-arch.org/chapter/taking-the-pulse-of-bluff/.

15. Yusaf and Galarza, "Taking the Pulse of Bluff," 237-43.

16. John Quale, "Design/Build/Evaluate: Connecting with Actual Humans," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 33-47.

17. Andrew Freear, "Backyard Architecture," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 19-32.

18. Robert Corser and Nils Gore, "Insurgent Architecture: An Alternative Approach to Design-Build," Journal of Architectural Education 62 no. 4 (May 2009): 32-39.

19. Andrew Freear, "Backyard Architecture," 19-32.

20. These points arise consistently in the following publications and in conversation with designbuild instructors Rob Pyatt, Janna Ferguson, and Erik Sommerfeld. Larry Bowne, "Each One, Teach One: Nested Associations in Designbuild Education," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 62-77.; Andrew Freear, "Backyard Architecture," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 19-32; Nils Gore and Shannon Cris, "Embracing Uncertainty: Community Designbuild," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 48-61; John Quale, "Design/Build/Evaluate: Connecting with Actual Humans," in Designbuild Education, ed. Chad Kraus, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 33-47.

21. Pyatt, et. al, "Pedagogy into Practice," 137-53.

22. Rob Pyatt and Jana Ferguson, conversation with author, October 9 2023.

23. Erik Sommerfeld, conversation with author, October 9, 2023.

24. Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, James Faubion, and Tobias Rees, Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary (Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2008): 112.

25. George Marcus, "Notes Toward and Ethnographic Memoir of Supervising Ethnographic Research through Anthropology's Decades of Transformation," 1-32.

26. Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion, and Rees, Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary, 112-16.

PAPER

these perspectives, I might fortify the possibility for employing the method of first fieldwork into the designbuild curriculum when applied to communities unfamiliar to the practioners.