

## The Urban Studio Project recipe: A multidisciplinary approach to feminist practice through community engagement.

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### **Abstract:**

The Urban Studio was initially planned to enhance the pedagogy and curriculum of students in the Department of Interior Architecture through the design and construction of a home for a needy family. This project grew to include faculty and students from the Department of Social Work when the need for a psychosocial perspective was identified. The project resulted in a discovery of the potential benefits of an interdisciplinary endeavor framed by a feminist perspective. It became both a service learning opportunity and a way to make a significant impact by ameliorating a substandard housing structure in a transitional neighborhood.

**Keywords:** design | interior architecture | social work | feminism | service learning | feminist practice | housing | education | interdisciplinary education

### **Article:**

This metaphorical recipe is particularly appropriate to describe the Urban Studio because it combines existential ingredients, allows time to absorb the flavors of hard work, and results in the reconstruction of “women’s work” through the construction of a home.

Ingredients:

Start with fresh ideas.

Add faculty representing diverse professions.

Mix in a generous portion of student participation (predominately female).

Blend a healthy measure of community engagement.

Swirl social justice throughout.

Fold in a feminist pedagogical framework.

Season with service learning herbs and spices.

Bake in an environment that is hungry for change.

Garnish: Support from university administration

Yield: A deliciously transformed community

Special equipment: An ability to enjoy a creative process, a passion for service, a sprinkling of humor, and an appreciation of an aesthetic experience.

Faculty from the Departments of Social Work and Interior Architecture at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) collaborated on a project—the Urban Studio—that blended the values and perspectives from two distinctive and diverse disciplines. The result was a transformative educational experience that effected change in our students, our community, and our own professional growth process while designing and constructing a safe home for a deserving elderly couple.

The Urban Studio project was formulated to be an experience that exceeded the university classroom and campus. This creative adventure, the first of its kind in Greensboro, North Carolina, originally sought to address the economic and housing oppression of a local community. The Urban Studio was initially planned to enhance the pedagogy and the curriculum of interior architecture students by designing and building a new house for a needy family. However, this project grew to include faculty and students from the Department of Social Work when the need for interdisciplinary collaboration was identified. Serendipitously, it resulted in the creation of a renewed awareness of our own professions and a discovery of the potential benefits of an interdisciplinary endeavor framed by a feminist perspective.

#### General Overview of the Project

This initiative, named the “Dillard Street” project, began in 2006 when a faculty member from the Department of Interior Architecture conceptualized a curriculum to teach students the real-life application of designing and constructing a home. This pedagogical project took place in one academic calendar year and included primarily undergraduate female students at UNCG, who had no prior experience in building construction.

The Urban Studio faculty worked closely with the city inspectors and officials and a local housing advocacy agency to obtain funding for the project and to locate a housing unit in need of replacement that qualified under this funding. Once the unit was selected, the Urban Studio project was developed to provide a low-cost single-family house that would be built on the site of the previous home. The couple who were identified as the recipients of this project were impoverished, disadvantaged, multiracial (African American and Native American), and elderly.

For the purposes of confidentiality, we refer to them as the “Dillardards.” The Dillardards owned their own home but it was in gross disrepair and was slated to be condemned because of a multitude of housing code violations, the lack of adequate plumbing and heating, dangerous electrical wiring, an infestation of rats, and general hazardous conditions. In addition to their unsafe housing conditions, Mr. and Mrs. Dillard suffered significant health challenges that added to the severity of the safety issues in their home. They experienced a lifelong history of economic and racial discrimination compounded by illiteracy. Furthermore, they had been victims of con artists and were misled about “government housing projects” that never materialized, which added to their financial hardships and contributed to their reluctance to trust outsiders.

As these circumstances became known, the Dillardards’ justifiable need for a new home became a “cause célèbre” among all those who were involved in designing, building, and helping the couple move out of and into their new home—attracting help from friends of the students; donated materials and furniture from suppliers and retailers; and volunteer time from a number of relocation, building, and construction professionals. As a result, the project took on greater meaning. It became both a service learning opportunity for students and a way to make a real impact by ameliorating a substandard housing structure in a transitional neighborhood.

At the onset of the project, a faculty member of the Department of Interior Architecture invited a psychologist from the School of Human Environmental Sciences, a faculty member from the Department of Social Work, and representatives from a few community agencies to collaborate as the couple’s multifaceted psychosocial needs were identified. The social work faculty began work with the Dillardards in the initial phase of the project, assisting them to communicate their needs to the interior architecture faculty and students in designing the housing plans and later worked with volunteers and social service agencies to provide support for the family as they prepared to move out of their home during the construction phase. Social work students were not involved in this project until the construction phase of the project because the constraints on their academic calendar were limited until this phase of the project. At this time, the social work faculty member prepared students for their involvement in assisting the family to move back to their newly constructed home. Unlike the interior architecture students, who received academic credit for this project, the social work students did not receive any academic credit and undertook this project as a community service venture. However, the educational benefits of this work led to significant learning opportunities for them.

The social work profession teaches the knowledge and skills to work with vulnerable and oppressed populations. The social work faculty member was cognizant of the inherent reality of oppression as a potential obstacle to building rapport and trust with the Dillardards. We realized the need to work empathically to build bridges of communication and confidence. We acknowledged the essential need to appreciate Mr. and Mrs. Dillard’s feelings of loss as they prepared to vacate the home they had occupied for the past 30 years until another home was rebuilt for them on the site. Even though their former home was dilapidated, dangerous, and on the verge of being condemned, the transition necessitated the Dillardards to endure enormous change that involved

trust in the university and community services team and faith in the process that would eventually improve the quality of their lives. This was a huge challenge for a couple of their age, physical vulnerabilities, and experiential backgrounds. In addition, the Dillard's needed support to advocate for and broker resources to assist them with the transition. Social work training has at its foundation building relationships of trust with clients, connecting them to resources, and assisting them through the complexities of bureaucracies. The profession's understanding of these complexities lends itself to projects that have collective and emotive components.

### The Roles and Contributions of the Collaborators

The originally designed project "just" to teach interior architecture students the practicalities of design and construction expanded to include social work faculty and students as the community partners recognized the psychosocial implications for the recipient couple. Through this project, a partnership emerged between two departments that historically shared the common ground rooted in traditional women's professions but had dissimilar educational goals and objectives and few instances of cooperative learning experiences. In the process, we uncovered significant differences and similarities between the two professions as they related to the implementation and completion of the project; each discipline mirrored its particular profession's values and problem-solving approaches.

The social work faculty sought an opportunity for their students to become actively involved in a meaningful learning project that was predicated on the feminist values of collaboration and social justice. The bachelor of social work (BSW) and master of social work (MSW) student volunteers participated as official representatives of the National Association of Social Workers' student organization. A post project focus group revealed that the social work students viewed the project as a significant learning experience that was rich in social justice practice. Many of the students reported that they could personally relate to the Dillard's, who reminded them of their own grandparents. A personal connection with others is one of the essential links to feminist practice and ideology.

Historically, partnership and collaboration between social work and interior architecture professionals has not been traditional in either the practice field or in academe. Nevertheless, in our opinion, there are concepts that implicitly connect the theory base of these two disciplines. Social work's theoretical framework of understanding the "person-in-environment" can be readily linked to phenomenological studies of interior architecture that acknowledge the emotional aspects of housing as they relate to relationships between people and places (Manzo, 2003). The connection between people and their domain is ever changing, much like social work's understanding that "the human condition is perceived not in stasis, but as part of an interactive open system; not as unidimensional, but as immersed in, affecting, and affected by the social and physical environment" (Collins, 1986, p. 216). Although the professions are distinct, the social workers' and designers' collective efforts offer complementary contributions

to projects and learning opportunities, especially endeavors that value a feminist epistemological framework that addresses issues of social justice and attempts to rectify oppression.

### Project's Feminist Approach

The philosophical underpinnings of social work have been rooted in caring for the welfare of our most vulnerable populations (e.g., children, the elderly, and the disenfranchised) through time-honored domains of women's work (e.g., teaching, nurturing, and caring for others). The Urban Studio, a construction project traditionally in the realm of men's work, was expanded to include a feminist perspective. Faculty and students have benefited from working as a multidisciplinary team and from responding in tangible ways to address social justice concerns. In addition, mutual engagement with local stakeholders (e.g., governmental organizations, city housing departments, and nonprofit agencies) has built mutual respect and trust between the university system and the local community.

As the recipient of the 2008 Greensboro Housing Coalition's Most Effective Housing Collaboration Award, the Urban Studio project embodies the values of partnership and mirrors the doctrines of feminist practice in action. Sutton and Kemp (2006, p. 125) affirmed the benefits of interdisciplinary collaborations that "aim to facilitate meaningful community outcomes [that] require both the right mix of disciplinary knowledge and effective community participation, which together can deepen collective knowledge and the capacity to take action." Much like feminism, the nature of the Urban Studio project takes on political, philosophical, and cultural meaning.

The Department of Interior Architecture supplied the technical building blocks of the enterprise and the Department of Social Work provided knowledge regarding an essential ingredient that is often omitted from such endeavors—that of social capital, oppression, social justice, and a feminist perspective. In mirroring social work principles, feminist perspectives value the collaboration of ideas, resources, and a collective effort to work to achieve social justice and democracy, thereby dismantling oppression. Oppression exists in multiple forms (e.g., poverty, ageism, sexism, and racism) and affects individuals and communities. Change, reconstruction, and redefinition may develop through creating partnerships—a unification that combines the strengths and perspectives of many working toward a common mission.

It is worth noting that a majority of interior architecture majors are female and that historically few projects beyond the fabrication of a single piece of architecture have been attempted. The Urban Studio changed this situation with its emphasis on design-build and, perhaps what is more important, with its integration of feminist ideals of empowerment and fair treatment into the project's conception and design.

Because of this experience, interior architecture students were not limited by formally rigid societal roles that conceptualized the notion that only men can construct buildings and that women are relegated to the design elements. This feminist lens, which was brought to the project

by its faculty and students, offers a perspective on “finding creative solutions to perplexing community problems” (Sutton & Kemp, 2006, p. 126), in this case the challenges of the design, construction, and recognition and meeting of the Dillard’s psychosocial needs.

### The Benefits, Opportunities, and Challenges

The Urban Studio project afforded faculty and students from the Department of Interior Architecture and the Department of Social Work an opportunity to learn valuable lessons about nontraditional opportunities for collaboration. It offered interdisciplinary engagement as faculty members were able to fully share ideas, critique professional viewpoints, and analyze multiple perspectives with each other and many times with the students from our partnering discipline. The project has provided opportunities for faculty members to engage in a creative discourse across disciplines. The process has produced a threefold outcome: a deeper understanding of the value and limitations of our respective disciplines, a respect for the theories of the others’ disciplines, and an appreciation of the cross-pollination of ideas and traditions between the disciplines. The process has produced areas of professional growth, collegiality, and the transformation of ideas that would not have been created without the partnering experiences.

We recognize that there were several limitations of the project. These restrictions included an external time frame (completion within an academic semester) and fiscal and resource constraints. We also acknowledge that although it would have been beneficial for social work students to be involved in this project from its initiation, academic constraints permitted these students to become engaged only in the final phase of the project. Because of these time limitations, we recognize the missed opportunity to bring interior architecture and social work students together formally—an occasion that would have created significant learning for both groups of students. Nonetheless, we believe that the benefits of the project far outweighed our challenges, because this social justice project positively affected our university and the larger community.

### Lessons Learned

In the process of deconstructing our profession, we learned that professional training in interior architecture is fundamentally individualist. Students initially brainstorm on the broad design construction plan but then work individually developing and presenting their designs; this way of working produces work that benefits from criticism and competition. Although there are instances of team participation, typical student design projects lack the value of being formed through collaboration, shared responsibility, and consensus—key principles of social work.

The partnership with the Urban Studio project taught the faculty in both departments that we are steeped in the idiosyncratic nature of our respective professions. We gained a deeper understanding of our own professional position and were reminded that we must continually teach our students to examine and work toward inclusiveness as we serve our community and strive for social justice.

## Next Steps

As a result of this project, the Urban Studio has begun work on a larger, more challenging, multiphase and multiyear project. The new project involves the construction of a residential facility for homeless new teenage mothers. The facility, named My Sister Susan's House is, in part, a product of the Dillard Street home project because it involves the same pattern of evolution of partnerships with an increasing number of academic departments (Interior Architecture, Social Work, Nutrition, Public Health, and Communication Science and Disorders) and community organizations. This project retains the initial mission of the Urban Studio to educate students in design and construction through service learning to address the unmet needs in our community.

As a result of incorporating the lessons that we learned from the Dillard Street project and the extended time frame of the My Sister Susan's House project, the Urban Studio has been able to build on the strengths of interdisciplinary work. Currently, students from several departments are receiving academic credit for their work on this project (social work has incorporated a field placement in the project) and plans are being implemented to include an interdisciplinary seminar in which students can learn from each other. Community engagement has expanded with the My Sister Susan's House project because this venture grew out of a request from a local social service agency that identified the need for housing to serve homeless teenage mothers in our community. The Urban Studio project has been able to modify its "pedagogical recipe" in meeting the needs of our educational and local community.

In summary, just as with a recipe, if the process is followed correctly, we can count on a dependable if not enjoyable outcome. In both the Dillard Street and the My Sister Susan's House projects, the combinations have produced remarkable and memorable experiences that can be savored for the goodness they have produced and for the delight that is yet to be experienced. The Urban Studio project has fed the appetite for learning in both students and faculty while providing sustenance for the homeowners and their neighborhood—a delicious recipe indeed!

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## **Bios**

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