

A Critical Eye on the Service Learning Experience

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The main focus of our studies this semester in the sophomore year at Tulane School of Architecture was the Atchafalaya Basin in Louisiana, an important part of not only recent events but of the watershed for a third of the country. The recent recognition of its importance is due to the flooding that occurred the summer of 2011. This flooding was caused by both melting snow and rain from areas farther north in the country. For the service learning project in Professor Andrew Liles' class, our first semester sophomore Design Studio course, we studied the effect this flooding had on the area and precautions occupants took on both an individual scale and with regard to city planning.

Within the architecture studio work we studied, diagrammed, and conceptually mapped the watershed area to gain further understanding of its inner workings. We did this by looking at and critically examining the site, context, and infrastructure. This research provided us with the information that we could then use to influence our museum designs in order to make them relevant to the area. The goal of our Design Studio Project was to design a museum that highlighted shrimp and petroleum, the major industries of Morgan City. This museum would also include a performance space, shop, and café. The information came into play when we were deciding how to respond to the infrastructure of the area when designing the layout of the building as well as the façade treatments. We were also able to find planning systems within the site and then adapt those systems for the organization of our proposals.

Continuing with this line of investigation, the service learning added to this exploration by bringing in another level – the human scale, not physically, but emotionally and rationally. The citizens of this area were affected in different ways and we wanted to know how these affects reflected on the area as a whole. The people of Morgan City, as the class had been told, love to know and celebrate their history. This service learning project assisted them in being able to document what occurred in the recent flood, a significant event in their history. During the last flood of 1973, Morgan City officials attempted to collect the stories of the people in the affected areas. They were successful in gaining some documentation, but the information was never circulated, as demonstrated in a photograph of the records sitting in a box, seemingly untouched for years. For our project, students interviewed many different business owners who live in and around Morgan City to gain different perspectives on the effects of the flood. Each group wrote an article on their interviewee's experience and provided a photograph relevant to the individual's story. These narratives were printed in the book, *Morgan City 2011: Documenting the Floods for the Morgan City Archives*.

My thoughts about this project are mixed. Interviewing Charlie Solar in Morgan City did not influence my studio project because it happened too late in the design phase. From the interviews we learned that many citizens, including Solar, raised their furniture on cinder blocks to keep their belongings dry. This was one of the more helpful tips for our design, but by the time we had interviewed the citizens, we had already discovered the benefit of raising our building through our site research of the downtown area of Morgan City.

While this project didn't influence my studio design directly, I think it will ultimately influence my strategies as an architect. I say this because it caused me to look more at the affects that the site and context have at the human scale. In this stage of my architectural education, I

have often had a hard time understanding the effect that ceiling height, light, and other design elements have on a person's experience in a space. As a result, my spaces haven't been as rich as they could be because I do not connect as much with the human scale.

However, Solar's and other interviewees' experiences were not affected by the flood to the extent many of us expected. There wasn't as strong of an emotional connection to this event to inspire our emotional connection as student designers. This made the idea of the human scale harder to grasp. Yet I do feel that in the future, when confronted with a project in an affected area, I could apply similar research methods. This could allow me to connect at the human level, which would add richness to my designs by being sensitive to and understanding the experiences of those in the area.

In addition, the service learning did give me information I didn't previously know about the area before the semester, and it influenced my ideas of how to approach the investigation of a site. I realized that a person's sense of community and home can be so strong that they will live in a potentially dangerous area rather than move to a safer location. I also learned that that the flood was not negative for everyone. For example, Solar makes a living not only through his pawnshop, but also by selling sand. He profits financially when there is flooding because sand is led directly into his pit, and he can sell it back to the citizens and the city. His property was not flooded because he lives within the levee walls of the city, but he knew he had to prepare for the flood and acted accordingly. When asked why he chose to live in an area that is within the flood zone of the Atchafalaya Basin, Solar explained that it is where he grew up and he loves that he knows everyone in the town, and they know him. Morgan City is his home, and he doesn't want to move anywhere else. As a business owner and resident, Solar had a different perspective on the issues relating to the flood and strengthened the idea that each person's ideas have been shaped by their personal and community experiences and can provide insight that someone had not thought of before.