The Charrette Connection

The three main purposes of the University of Georgia are instruction, research, and, despite our love of UGA sports, service. The CED has several public service and outreach programs including charrettes. A charrette is a series of fast-paced, creative work sessions that focus on one design problem. Usually, many designers and members of the community are involved, and the final product contains collaborative solutions. I give such a vague description because in reality, each charrette is organized so differently.

I spoke with Megan Zeigler, a third year graduate assistant, who organizes participating students and charrette logistics. She has been a part of many charrettes and helps to compile the resulting work and further research into a cohesive document that is then presented to the community. Megan said, “What’s great about charrettes is they’re so diverse. It expands your wealth of knowledge in general.” While studio projects are restrained to general guidelines, in charrettes you work with real projects and actual clients. They also give a great way to explore a variety of career types and find out what expertise is needed. What all charrettes have in common is that they are an attempt to address real world problems.

Pratt Cassity (see below) is director of charrettes at the College. He began organizing charrettes with the Center for Community Design & Preservation in the late 90s. The CED has now completed about 68 charrettes and has a course for students dedicated to charrettes. Along with Pratt, Jennifer Lewis from the Center for Community Design & Preservation is the project manager for all public services and collaborates with municipalities to set up charrettes.

Charrettes are more than a resume filler. Megan urges students to participate in charrettes to learn the complexities of applied projects, to interact with people, and to practice communication and listening skills. Usually, local community participants “fill you in on what’s wrong with their community. They know how to fix it.” What makes good designers is their ability to listen, not someone who can tell people what they need. As landscape architects we need to become great listeners and address social needs.

I participated in a charrette in Augusta, Georgia in October 2008 that worked with Hyde Park neighborhood members to find solutions to their economically depressed and ecologically polluted neighborhood. It was highly educating in terms of understanding community processes and exposure to a place I would otherwise never visit. In terms of our College, charrettes allow grad students and undergrads, professors and staff to meet, interact, and work together, each bringing their own skills to the table.

— Agustina Hein, fourth year BLA

Know Your Profs

Pratt organizes around 6 charrettes per year that involve many fields of study including those beyond our college. Charrette projects range from identifying historical landmarks for municipalities using GIS data, to securing government funding for local communities for historical preservation. For Pratt, seeing communities directly benefit from his work has been more honorable than any award he has received.

Building partnerships amongst fields of study is the root of Pratt’s teaching philosophy. He sees how students can become detached from real world situations in the academic world. In the real world, many problems cannot be isolated. Rather, Pratt argues, one should look at all things in context from a holistic point of view, seeing how everything is interconnected, for a more successful solution. Charrettes model this approach to problem solving and the experience is invaluable to any student entering a client serving profession.

If you are interested in participating in a charrette, talk to Pratt in the Founder’s House about the charrette course. Pratt also teaches courses in new construction in historical districts and a freshman seminar about global engagement.

— Robert Evans, Fourth Year BLA