Assembly
 REQUIRED

Constructing a collaborative approach to design

THE SMALL BRICK BUILDING bookended by empty storefronts on Greensboro’s West Gate City Boulevard doesn’t command much attention. With the exception of its lime-green “CC-ED” sign, you’d be hard-pressed to notice it at all. But inside, the energy is palpable as interior architecture students and their professors join forces with community partners to provide design solutions for nonprofits and Greensboro’s underserved populations.

Travis Hicks doesn’t mind the center’s physical surroundings. As director of UNC Greensboro’s Center for Community-Engaged Design since its headquarters opened in 2014, Hicks celebrates the advantages of an unassuming building. “For some community partners, it helps to have a place that doesn’t have the same institutional feel of the campus,” he says.
Hicks began his career working alongside world-renowned architects Michael Graves and Phil Freelon. The work was challenging, he says, involving teams of people from different disciplines collaborating on difficult, large-scale “puzzles” of building designs. But, he says, the CC-ED is just as complex. “The number of design professionals involved is fewer, but the number of community stakeholders is higher.”

In addition to his work with students and faculty on a variety of community-engaged design projects, Hicks facilitates annual work internships for Community Housing Solutions. Students partnered with Peacehaven, a working farm for adults with developmental disabilities, to design a new community center, they started by talking with the residents. And when they partnered with Tiny Houses Greensboro, an organization committed to reducing homelessness, they began with a Greensboro citizen who needed a home. “The concept of community-engaged design is a new and rising force in design architecture,” says Hicks, who is certified as both an architect and interior designer and practiced 13 years in the professional realm before coming to UNCG in 2009. In his previous career, Hicks worked as lead design architect on large-scale projects ranging from office buildings to courthouses and schools — with little to no collaboration with the end users. “We would work with maybe a couple of specialists here and there. But we rarely consulted the people who would have worked in or occupied these public projects,” Hicks says. “That’s not what the CC-ED is about. We want to bring our students and practitioners together with the people who will occupy and live in these spaces.”

Plus, the associate professor of interior architecture knows good design starts from within. The most basic element of a building isn’t a brick; it’s the person who uses the building. So when Hicks and his students partnered with Peacehaven, a working farm for adults with developmental disabilities, to design a new community center, they started by talking with the residents. And when they partnered with Tiny Houses Greensboro, an organization committed to reducing homelessness, they began with a Greensboro citizen who needed a home. “The concept of community-engaged design is a new and rising force in design architecture,” says Hicks, who is certified as both an architect and interior designer and practiced 13 years in the professional realm before coming to UNCG in 2009. In his previous career, Hicks worked as lead design architect on large-scale projects ranging from office buildings to courthouses and schools — with little to no collaboration with the end users. “We would work with maybe a couple of specialists here and there. But we rarely consulted the people who would have worked in or occupied these public projects,” Hicks says. “That’s not what the CC-ED is about. We want to bring our students and practitioners together with the people who will occupy and live in these spaces.”

As CC-ED director, Hicks facilitated more than 30,000 hours of public service in the past year alone. The CC-ED has provided fellowships for more than 40 students and has engaged in over 30 projects, ranging from the Glenwood Grove Mural to community renovations for Community Housing Solutions. Above, Hicks works with graduate student Jessica Ocasio.

There’s more to interior architecture than picking out paint colors and accessorizing. Students in UNCG’s Department of Interior Architecture are exposed to building structures and to electrical and plumbing systems. They learn about sustainable design for historic preservation and dive into public-interest design, where issues like low-income housing and energy efficiency are front and center. Through the CC-ED, they put those ideas into practice working with community partners needing real and immediate solutions. One of these partners is Peacehaven, a working farm with rolling hills and lush woodlands in Whitsett, North Carolina. As Peacehaven grew from a plot of land in 2007 to a home for four residents with developmental disabilities — plus a long wait list of people needing services — co-founder Buck Cochran realized a need for a community center where Peacehaven’s residents, service providers, and volunteers could gather. “We have so many trusted partners at UNCG, including social work interns who perform essential programming and training for our residents. They needed a place to perform that training,” says Cochran. “We went to Travis Hicks and said, ‘Hey, this is what we’re thinking. Can you help us think about what type of structure would fit with this farm vernacular?’”

Cochran was blown away by the CC-ED’s approach. “They started by listening,” Cochran says. “Then they asked clarifying questions, ones that may challenge you a little in your thinking. And they were able to combine a lot of different ideas in a way that was really meaningful.”

Not only did the students’ brainstorming sessions include Cochran and other members of the Peacehaven leadership team, they pulled in residents and their caretakers to better understand how the space would be used. “I’m afraid when most people think about folks with disabilities, they discount the value they could bring to this process,” Cochran says. “But when you create the right setting, those ideas will come.”

When Peacehaven’s new community center is constructed, its residents will recognize many of their ideas. “Folks on the autism spectrum can be overwhelmed by a large space,” Cochran says. “Because the input from our residents, Hicks and his students carved out smaller spaces in the community center where residents could go to find respite from larger group activities, if they need a retreat.”

Cochran sees the CC-ED as an economic catalyst for the broader community. “They’re an unbelievably important resource. We don’t have the capacity to generate these things on our own, but they got us to a point where we could see their plans fruition. We’re now able to hire builders who will bring it to life,” Cochran says.

To mention the impact a project like this has on the students, he adds. “Soon, they will drive down the road, point to a new building and say, ‘I designed that, and it is having a positive impact on my community.’ That is incredible real-life experience.”
As part of the design process, Hicks teaches his students how to talk to their end users to get their input. There’s not a single formula with a guaranteed outcome, some creativity is required.

“As a student fellow at the CC-ED, UNCG senior Elizabeth Graves remembers a project with Greensboro’s Cottage Grove community. The neighborhood had a vacant outdoor space atop a former landfill, and Graves and her peers were tasked with recommending landscaping and design improvements. The CC-ED already had a strong relationship with Cottage Grove residents. Under Hicks’ leadership, students had helped to design a new Mustard Seed health clinic in a former parsonage offered by New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. They’d also designed a master plan for a future community center, community garden spaces, and education spaces.

“From the ground up

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To get the Cottage Grove residents’ feedback on the new project, the students printed out images of different outdoor designs, such as lamp posts and playground equipment, and asked residents to circle the things they would most like to use in their space. Having a visual aid was especially important for a diverse group of end users that included non-English-speaking immigrants and refugees.

Graves says she and her team members expected the Cottage Grove residents to gravitate toward features such as a playground for their children. “But they circled things like trash cans and covered bus stops.” Soon, those workshopts will translate into visually appealing, functional spaces that enhance the lives of Cottage Grove residents.

Hicks adds that not only was the team able to use those circled images as a way of sparking conversation, they got more feedback than they would have with a standard survey. “With my experience teaching and observing other community-based designers over the years, I’ve been exposed to a lot of different techniques for working with community members to get their input,” he says. “Knowing which ones are most appropriate requires a lot of listening and trying to understand the people with whom we’re collaborating.”

This thought leadership and approach to fostering the next generation of designers caught the attention of the national Council for Interior Design Accreditation, who honored Hicks and the CC-ED with the 2015 CIDA Award of Excellence. That same year, the North Carolina Campus Compact recognized Hicks with the statewide Robert L. Sigmon Service-Learning Award.

“Students who study under me in UNCG’s interior architecture program are exposed to a different way of practicing design — one that includes participants from all walks of life, from the CEO to your average neighborhood Joe,” Hicks says. “I hope my students come out of UNCG with a bit more empathy toward different perspectives and different populations, and are able to work in meaningful ways that will impact their own communities wherever they go.”

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