



Community Engagement 101 for Fashion, Graphic, and Interior Designers

MoB Studio's First Year

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Design, Community, Professional Practice

The Partnership

Fashion design and merchandising students at Virginia Commonwealth Universities (VCUarts) Middle of Broad Studio (MoB) are creating new roles and opportunities for design in the city of Richmond, VA. MoB is a partnership of three departments at VCUarts, Graphic Design, Fashion Design and Interior Design. These departments operate an experimental design lab that realizes the potential of design to shape the City. The Storefront for Community Design is Richmond's non-profit design assistance center, improving the quality of design in the city by facilitating access to design and planning resources. MoB+Storefront is a partnership between MoB and The Storefront for Community Design.

The Project

The project began with three VCU arts faculty in the departments of Fashion, Graphic and Interior design. These faculty felt that creating a design lab embedded in the city would create new opportunities for students to engage with and serve design needs in the community. Storefront was getting assistance requests from more clients than they could serve and needed to grow capacity. They all meet together in a rented storefront studio on downtown Richmond's main thoroughfare, in the midst of a still blighted neighborhood.

The Roadmap

Each semester, 12 to 20 projects are selected for the Mob course. Each student is assigned to one client as a Project Manager, and another job or two as a Designer. Each team receives a project brief with relevant details such as client, mentor, job title, deliverables, and a timetable. Student Project Managers are responsible for initiating client contact within the first week of classes and throughout the semester. Project Managers relay client needs to their student

design team and set up team meetings with a Storefront professional design mentor.

Educational Strategy

The proposed MoB program had an obvious need for graphic and interior design students, but what would fashion students contribute. Client requests which were often for identity, event, or architectural solutions. MoB faculty understood that the process of design problem solving was similar in each discipline. Design students are posed problems; they research the subject, develop and present first concepts, receive critical feedback, and create projects or proposals. Students, regardless of major, learn about design management as Project Managers. Each student experiences success, disappointment and growth as a designer when faced with real clients and their needs. Project solutions came from unexpected angles as interdisciplinary teams forged relationships. Fashion designers became the designers of a bike rack, interior designers created paper garments for a fashion show, and graphic designers became planners of urban corridors.

Success and Sustainability

MoB+Storefront has been wildly successful. The partnerships activities have been blogged in local media, presented at conferences in Japan and the US, and gained support across campus. Press and word of mouth has brought a constant flow of requests to the door. The role of fashion in the studio has become essential in MoB's second semester. Projects include: a chemotherapy garment, an adaptive wardrobe for conjoined twins, and a fashion design center has sprung up down the street. The success of the project has led to funding from VCUarts, and grant applications and development support are in process.

Conclusion

If we had not created this class, most of these clients would not have dreamed about the possibilities design could offer their organizations. The MoB studio has become the go to place for design organizations and civic organizations to hold meetings, events, openings and workshops. Fashion design and merchandising students have found that their skills are transferable and relevant to the larger civic design community. Not only do students walk away with completed projects to their credit, they have a new peer cohort of student designers, professionals, business people, and city and civic leaders. These relationships strengthen students learning and professionalize what they have been studying in the classroom. The model of a working design studio, with professional and civic engagement, where students serve community clients, has created a new picture for these young people of what design can offer to individuals, civic organizations, and the many residents of the city.