Empowered Pursuit: A Reflective Essay on Using Creative Learning in the Syracuse City School District

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Empowered Pursuit: A Reflective Essay on Using Creative Learning in the Syracuse City School District

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Environmental & Interior Design

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Abstract

Within the Syracuse City School District, students have been struggling to thrive in an educational environment that focuses on standardization. In 2012, only 48% of high school seniors graduated with a high school diploma in the city of Syracuse. Numerous theories have been discussed as to why students have failed to succeed, with a large portion of these centered on the problems created by the No Child Left Behind Act.

This reflective essay constructs and deconstructs the research and conceptual work produced surrounding the topic of creative learning within the Syracuse City School District. Initial research, summarized in this paper, sought to discover the ties between student motivation and a need for an outlet to deal with issues occurring outside the classroom - often in the home environment. Research was conducted from a variety of sources on the issues of family and parental participation in largely African American inner city schools, the teaching of social-emotional intelligence, and the effects of creative arts-based learning on emotional well being and academic performance. Findings reported that creative arts programs – in and out of the school environment – helped inner-city middle and high school students to perform better than their peers on standardized tests and also helped at-risk students to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy despite their unique circumstances.

By exploring the problems and proposed solutions of inner-city middle and high school students throughout the country and in the city of Syracuse, curriculum and design concepts began to develop as a multi-level solution. Completed creative work includes construction documents, presentation drawings, and materials specifications.
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Executive Summary

Starting off on my Capstone in the fall of 2012, I had decided to complete a creative project. As an Environmental and Interior Design student, this category fit hand-in-hand with my studies and directly with my Senior Thesis. While work on my thesis itself did not begin until the fall 2013 semester, I began formulating ideas for a topic in 2012. Eventually, I chose to pursue one of my original interests – education.

With this in mind, I decided to focus my Senior Thesis and Capstone on creative learning in the context of the City of Syracuse. The project itself would ultimately take form as a designed interior space, as design is a creative solution to a problem. This space started from and was based off of both primary and secondary research, proving a need for the end goal. This end goal was to create a space that, in some form, offered a solution to a select few problems found during the research phase.

Although I grew up in Central New York, I was largely unfamiliar with the ins-and-outs of the Syracuse City School District. Knowing this, I decided to work with the Hillside Family of Agencies – a local non-profit organization offering academic and interpersonal services to at-risk Syracuse middle and high school students – in order to gain a firsthand account of what problems the City of Syracuse’s students faced. After speaking to the program director, Wayne O’Connor, as well as some of the more open students, I found many issues of concern surrounding the students. As a requirement to enroll in the program, all of
the students exhibited two or more risk factors. These risk factors, ranging from having parents working long hours to exposure to domestic violence, often lead to problems within the academic setting as well as later in life. While these students received mentoring and tutoring services daily from the Hillside staff, they still showed signs and expressed that they did not feel they could control their lives and how they handled the events occurring within them. In addition, many students expressed direct discontent with their schooling as well as their home lives.

In addition to this hands-on, observational experience, I collected and analyzed secondary studies, books, and reports. From these various sources, I concluded that many of the situations students in the City of Syracuse faced were commonly shared with those of major metropolitan inner-city areas. From this point, I looked into problems relative to these areas. My findings showed that inadequate education – largely due to a lack of funding as well as standardization in the classroom - paired with outside environmental stressors created a chaotic environment and day-to-day life for students in inner-city neighborhoods.

Moving from problem to potential solution, I began to research methods for helping inner-city students both academically and emotionally. While many approaches to this issue presented themselves, a commonly referenced idea was the arts. Various precedent studies showed success in using the arts as an academic booster (see bibliography), with those students who participated in arts-related afterschool programs seeing impressive gains on state testing over those who did not. Similarly, students participating in the creative arts excel in critical
thinking skills in comparison to their peers. In addition, multiple studies have shown that arts therapy approaches help students gain lifelong coping skills that aid in dealing with their unique, and often troubling, situations.

Keeping all of this in mind, I found the arts to be largely neglected within the United States educational system as well as in the Syracuse City School District. Even programs such as Hillside had minimal enrichment activities focused on the creative arts – including traditional arts such as drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, dance and theater as well as creative writing and computer engineering arts. As a whole, the creative arts seemed to be untapped resources in helping students succeed academically and socially.

Overall, my research showed that middle and high school students in the Syracuse City School District were in need of motivation to learn as well as an outlet to deal with issues occurring outside of the classroom. Moving into the design phase of the project, my intent was to create a space that fostered improved academic performance as well as a sense of self-efficacy among inner-city middle and high school students through a creative arts lens.

After a thoughtful site analysis, I decided to use the current CabFab building – located at 124 Burnet Avenue in Syracuse, NY – as the backdrop for my interior design thesis. Based off of demographics of the city as well as the students in the district, the site proved to be an optimally located and spacious building shell with many design opportunities. In addition, I developed a program of interior spaces and functions based off of the prior research. In this context, the program refers an analysis of the needs and goals of the end user, the existing
conditions of the building, and safety and code requirements. This program included public spaces such as the entry, reception/gallery, Black Box Theater, administrative offices, and lounges as well as more private classrooms. These studio classrooms included visual arts, ceramics, sculpture, music, movement, and language arts as well as a media library and computer lab.

With a solidified program in place, I moved into the schematic design phase in which I arranged the individual spaces within the larger building, created a cohesive visual concept, and began to consider materials and finishes for the final design. All of these decisions, however, had to support and emphasize my original intent of creating empowered pursuit – a phrase I had developed from my original concept of empowering students in their pursuit of a better life.

After weeks of further improvements and experimentation, I moved into the design development phase. Design development involves producing initial construction documents and other presentation documents. These documents include floorplans, reflected ceiling plans (a construction document depicting designed elements located on the ceiling), material and furniture plans (that show specified finishes, materials, and furniture within the context of the floor plan), elevations, sections (that show perpendicular views of interior walls rather than the floor plane), and details (that show further zoomed in views of unique design elements or construction features). This phase leads directly into the construction document phase, in which these drawings are finalized and crafted to a level of detail where the space could actually be built.
While working on the construction documents, I also produced a digital three-dimensional model of the existing space as well as my design intervention. From this model, I produced presentation quality renderings (detailed architectural drawings) that were included in a final slide presentation and poster. As a final component, I drafted a summary of my research as well as a reflection essay breaking down individual design decisions throughout the entire project.
Acknowledgements

A special thanks to Zeke and Jen for their constant support and feedback throughout the thesis and Capstone process. Thank you for your patience and guidance with my specific circumstances.

Thank you to Wayne O’Connor, Mark Vasquez, and Mike Olsen for allowing me the opportunity to work with the gifted students at Hillside Family of Agencies. Your accommodation allowed me to really see the unique circumstances Syracuse City School District students face.

To Chris Clemens and Harmony Design Group – Thank you for your speedy correspondence and understanding in acquiring pans for the CabFab Building. Your assistance saved me many headaches.

Lastly, thank you to my amazing support system that is the interior design senior class. You’re a beautiful group of people and without you, I probably would never have made it through the past three years.
Part I: Background and Research Summary
Chapter 1

Introduction

The Plight of the Student

Traditionally, the idea of the United States as a “melting pot” society is one that has been taught to countless generations. The idea, coined by Israel Zangwill in his play about immigrants in America, describes the nation as a diverse mixture of peoples of different ethnicities, cultures, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds.\(^1\) Despite changes in demographics that have made the mix more equal, the idea of the “melting pot” holds true today – especially in our nation’s classrooms, which have become increasingly heterogeneous. It is this diversity that has been both friend and foe of the public school system, with educational policymakers and administrators in a constant struggle to create curricula and standards best suited to our nation’s students. To quote Executive Director of The Forum for Education and Democracy George Wood:

“[It is] the great promise of our public school system – that all children, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, creed, color, or disability will have equal access to an education that allows them to enjoy the freedoms and exercise the responsibilities of citizenship in our democracy.”

- George Wood, Many Children Left Behind\(^2\)

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Throughout the previous decades, various pieces of Federal and State legislation have made education accessible to every child, regardless of color, gender, or disability. More specifically, the beginning of this century saw movements to change curricula in an attempt to improve the quality, rather than accessibility, of education for all of the nation’s students. Many of these changes involve the implementation of a “cookie-cutter” approach to education, with universal standards and controls set in place to measure proficiency and progress.³

**Standardizing the Diverse**

Perhaps the most notable and contested legislation concerning education is the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. This legislation sought to increase academic success among all students, especially those who were typically seen as underperforming.⁴ More specifically, this categorization includes students from minorities, low-income families, or those with disabilities. In addition, the act set in place a series of standards and tests used to measure students’ proficiency with a focus on mathematics, reading, and language arts. Ultimately, the goal of *No Child Left Behind* was to have all public schools achieve proficiency in these areas by 2014.⁵ While the goals of this legislation were admirable, an achievement gap between varying groups of students also became more apparent through the legislation’s implementation, and in recent years, it became obvious

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that the act’s original goal would not be met. In addition, the original act expired in
2007, and without new legislation in place, schools were required to follow its
conditions until new legislation was created. Because of this, changes were made
to the No Child Left Behind Act in 2011 to allow for more flexibility within school
curricula to assist in closing the achievement gap. Specifically, New York State
was granted New York’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act waiver in May
of 2012, which loosened the standards placed to identify “proficiency” as well as
the repercussions for not meeting that goal.

While these changes have signaled progress in terms of academic success,
a few fundamental aspects of No Child Left Behind have been the cause of debate
since its inception. First, the public school system has become largely focused on
the idea of “teaching to the test,” in which students are taught to pass the test
rather than truly learn material. This leads to a fundamental disconnect between
what is taught in schools versus what knowledge is needed in the “real world” –
which many studies have described to be empathy, critical thought, and
creativity. In addition, the majority of public schools seem to have developed a
hierarchy of topics. This hierarchy begins with mathematics and language at the
top, humanities and sciences in the middle, and the arts almost always at the

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6 Jack Jennings and Diane Stark Rentner, “Ten Big Effects of the No Child Left Behind Act on
7 Joy Resmovits, “States Struggle to Overhaul Schools After No Child Left Behind,” Huffington
Post (January 2014) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/06/states-no-child-left-
8 New York State Education Department, The New York State Accountability Report, ACC-2012-
42180010047 (Syracuse, New York, 2013) pp. 1.
9 Joey Millstein, “No Child Left Behind Explained,” Simplify Reality, (January 2012)
10 Daniel H Pink, A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future (New York:
Riverhead, 2006)
bottom. In fact, a 2007 study produced by the Center for Educational Policy reported that 44% of schools cut time from programs such as art, music, and physical education.\(^\text{11}\) As previously discussed, this ranking of importance can, in part, be attributed to the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

With a lack of emphasis on “non-essential” subjects – sciences, foreign languages, history, and the arts – the focus on reading, writing, and mathematics creates the opportunity for pivotal skills to fall by the wayside. Specifically, critical thinking skills inherent in these missing subjects will be lacking as students progress through the public school system.\(^\text{12}\) This creates a dilemma for students as they experience situations requiring these skills in secondary school, college, their home environments, or the outside world.

**Facing Adversity Outside of the Classroom**

The plight of the public school student is not defined exclusively by legislation and curriculum set in place by school personnel and policymakers. Students from all backgrounds face stressors in their environments outside of the classroom that can stem from the activity of family, friends, and complete strangers. This is especially true of students in metropolitan areas, where these stressors are often concentrated. As defined in *Healing the Inner-City Child: Creative Arts Therapies with At-Risk Youth*, the term metropolitan describes


“primary central cities containing 50,000 or more inhabitants, with a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile.”

For students living in the inner city of such a metropolitan area, factors such as racism, inadequate healthcare, poverty, violence, poor housing, poor parenting, and abuse can add burden to an already troubled situation. Students who are subject to these chronic stressors are considered at-risk, meaning that they are “in danger of negative future events.” At-risk students typically exhibit a higher chance of developing depression or addiction and are more likely to experience educational failure, poverty, and imprisonment. These stressors paired with a toxic learning environment created by standardization, overcrowding, and inadequate funding create an even more dire need for change within the school environment.

Looking more closely at the effects of these chronic stressors, it is easy to see the need for a means of expressing and dealing with the emotional side effects they produce. For many adolescents, this expression comes from positive interactions with and support from family members. In any form, more parental involvement leads to greater academic success and, without it, the effects of chronic stressors can be intensified. Unfortunately for many at-risk students, family and parent interactions are often lacking. This occurs for many

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reasons, which can include but is not limited to one or both parents working long, unconventional hours, domestic violence between parents or between parent and child, lack of or extreme use of supervision and discipline and living with extended family.\textsuperscript{17}

**The Syracuse City School District**

With the former research in mind, I conducted both secondary and primary research to compare the circumstances surrounding adolescents in major metropolitan areas and those of the city of Syracuse. According to the 2010 Census, the city of Syracuse had a population of 145,170, with 8,881 people per square mile, classifying it as a metropolitan area.\textsuperscript{18} This in mind, the term “inner city” will be used to describe those students attending the Syracuse City School District and excludes students attending school in adjacent districts. Because of this, the 21,030 students in the Syracuse City School District fall prey to many of the aforementioned situations and stressors found in major cities.\textsuperscript{19} In fact in 2012, a mere 48% of high school seniors graduated in the city of Syracuse.\textsuperscript{20} This number is drastic in comparison to the national average of 78.2% just two years earlier.\textsuperscript{21}


Over the course of three months, I worked directly with Syracuse City School District high school students through Hillside Family of Agencies to investigate the circumstances surrounding this event further. This New York state-based, non-profit agency serves approximately 900 of the district’s 1930 eighth through twelfth grade students, providing after-school tutoring, mentoring, enrichment, and job training services.\(^{22}\)

During these three months, I tutored and spoke with many of the students at the Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection Phoenix Center in Syracuse, NY – most of whom were experiencing at least two of the aforementioned risk factors. These factors include exposure to racism, inadequate healthcare, poverty, violence, poor housing, poor parenting, and abuse. From speaking with the program director, Mr. Wayne O’Connor, some of the most common issues facing Hillside participants included having one or both parents working long, unconventional hours, low economic status, and living with non-immediate family or another family altogether.

In working directly with the students, I found that a select few were willing to open up about their experiences in the classroom as well as at home. Many of these students discussed having to constantly watch younger siblings due to working parents. Some described their homes as “too crazy,” a place that made them unhappy and stressed. One student was a refugee from another country and also a young mother. While the latter example is extreme, it became apparent that

the students’ academic struggles were most likely sourced from their struggles at home.

Occurring more commonly than the former discussions, nearly all of the students I spoke with at Hillside expressed extreme discontent with their schooling. While this occurrence is by no means exclusive to this group of students, it is particularly worth noting due to the external conditions.

One student discussed how she failed to recognize the relevance of what she was learning in the greater context of her life, saying that being forced to memorize the material taught in class was “doing nothing” for her. The assignment she was working on was, in fact, a simple fill-in-the blank exercise on the United States Constitution- an assignment given to a sophomore high school student. The student then continued to discuss a somewhat irrelevant issue she had heard about on the news as well as her feelings about it, rather than focus on the required classwork. While this action in and of itself was not productive, the student showed extreme interest in the news story and was able to make connections to the idea of right and wrong as well as identify basic rights that were discussed in her assignment. Although the student lacked interest in the assignment, she was, for a moment, able to make connections to the real world and discuss her feelings with passion.

Some further inspiration manifested itself after observing how the students chose to spend their time at Hillside when student advocates and mentors were not present. Instead of focusing on their work, many students chose to participate in activities involving a lot of movement or expression. On a regular basis, a
group of four or five girls would play music from their phones and choreograph their own dance routines during down time. Many of the students would opt to go to the gym for a game of basketball or to create and practice cheers. Some of the more reserved students would spend much of their time sketching in the margins of their papers – some even wrote poetry.

These events signaled two things to me - the first being that the curriculum these students were given was both unchallenging and disengaging and the second being that the majority of these students just needed a productive way to express themselves. Moving forward, I focused my research on solutions that would engage students, allow them to productively handle chronic stressors and their reactions to them, and aid in increasing academic performance. These solutions, discussed in the next chapter, largely involve the creative arts.
Chapter 2

Helping Our Students

Resiliency and Inner City Students

As discussed in the previous chapter, students in the Syracuse City School District are in need of motivation to learn, as well as an outlet to deal with issues occurring outside of the classroom. Many strategies have been developed in order to solve this problem, but they often fail to address the issue in a holistic manner. Programs aimed at helping inner city students need to focus on developing resiliency, which is defined as the ability to “...thrive in potentially harmful environments.”

In addition, resilient students are socially adept, display good problem-solving skills, and have both a sense of independence and purpose.

A large part of a student’s resiliency is determined by his or her ability to handle feelings created by outside events, as these emotions can have drastic effects on the student’s ability to learn. In addition, parental involvement with both the student and the community creates a strong social support network that supplements a student’s own, personal resilient characteristics. However, as discussed before, students do not always have the benefit of parents who are emotionally or physically available. Because of this, students are more dependent upon themselves and their own ability to handle outside stressors.

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Many strategies have been utilized to help improve students’ ability to cope with this, including mentoring, enrichment services, and therapy. One of these strategies is the use of the creative arts with inner city students – an entity that can often be lacking from the public educational system.\(^{27}\) Because state testing places a strong emphasis on mathematics, reading, and language arts, other subjects tend to fall by the wayside within school curricula. However, this is a fundamental error within our public schools as many invaluable skills are inherent in these other subjects – particularly the creative arts.

**Using the Arts for Academic and Emotional Well-Being**

For the purposes of this paper, we will define the term “creative arts” as a method of human expression by means of visual arts – including painting, drawing, sculpting, etcetera; performing arts – including music, dance, theater; and literature. In addition, this term will incorporate computer programming, as it most often requires critical, creative thought and human intuition.\(^{28}\)

The creative arts serve many purposes within the classroom as well as within our lives. First, by their definition alone, they serve as a means of expressing one’s inner self, thoughts, and emotions – a topic that will be discussed more in-depth later.\(^{29}\) Second, they create feelings of empowerment within their participants upon fruition of a created work. Lastly, they aid in

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developing pivotal life skills such as critical thought, increased understanding of patterns and geometry, and the ability to synthesize information.\textsuperscript{30}

Take, for instance, the work produced by the non-profit organization \textit{Inner City Arts} in Los Angeles, California. This organization provides over 3000 of Los Angeles’ elementary and middle school students with arts education programs outside of school hours.\textsuperscript{31} In 2002, the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies published a study that followed the program’s participants from 1997 to 2002. The study tracked students’ participation in the program as well as their performance on California state testing. Results showed that students who participated in the program just ten hours a week achieved an 18\% increase in reading scores, an 8\% increase in English proficiency, and a 25\% increase in mathematics.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition, a study conducted by the Center for Arts Education in 2009 examined the relationship between the teaching of arts in public schools and high school graduation rates. Conclusively, the study found that New York City high schools with the least amount of access to arts education concurrently had the lowest graduation rates when compared to schools with prominent arts programs.\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, multiple studies have found that at-risk students throughout

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\end{thebibliography}
the country attribute their motivation to stay in school and graduate to the arts. Studies such as these show that participation in, as well as having regular exposure to, the arts not only increases measurable data such as proficiency or graduation rates, but also immeasurable traits such as student interest and motivation.

Motivation to achieve in the school environment is not the only positive psychological effect of participating in the creative arts. According to a report by UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies professor, James Catterall, students who regularly participate in the arts are more engaged in a classroom setting and also feel a sense of control over themselves as well as their future. This feeling of control can stem from many aspects found in the process of participating in the creative arts. Elliot Eisner, a former professor of Art and Education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, further argued that creative arts education is crucial in facilitating students to handle the uncertainty inherent in day-to-day life. The arts, he says, allow for more “satisfaction, pleasure, and lingering allure,” than the more structure curricula in our schools. This continual process of creating emphasizes feelings of empowerment discussed earlier.

Chapter 3

Creating a New Program

Creating the Framework for a Creative Arts Center

As shown by my research thus far, the creative arts influence the personal and academic success of inner-city students across the nation. While the main issue lies within the curriculum, another solution is to create a new space that augments existing educational methods. This solution requires less time and overhaul of existing policy structures already in place.

While there are a few opportunities for students in the Syracuse City School District to participate in the arts – including existing art education classes, enrichment programs through Hillside Family of Agencies, programs led by Syracuse University and surrounding colleges, and so on – there is a lack of a centralized program or location for students to engage in the arts regularly.

With this in mind, I set up the framework for a hypothetical designed space for inner city students in the city of Syracuse to experience the creative arts. This space, called the Salt City Center for Creative Arts, would offer a variety of nightly, after school creative arts classes for its participants. Initially, the Salt City Center for Creative Arts would serve about 100 of the 900 students currently receiving mentoring and tutoring services through the Hillside Family of Agencies, as studies have shown the most improvement, academically and otherwise, in this type of demographic.
Selected students would need to fall into at least two at-risk criteria as presented in Part I. Again, these risk factors include, but are not limited to, detached family relationships, poor economic conditions, having minority status, and so on. In order to remain in the program, students would need to earn a B- or higher in their middle or high school courses and remain in good standing within the school environment as well as the outside community. Most importantly, students would need to have an explicit desire to participate in the creative arts program.

Classes at the Salt City Center for Creative Arts include two-dimensional visual arts, ceramics, sculpture, movement and dance, language arts, computer arts, and music. Many individual projects will be based on an art therapy model, allowing students to express themselves and take ownership of their own thoughts and emotions.

Students would be required to take at least one class in each area upon admission into the program for at least ten hours per week. This would give the students the opportunity to experience multiple avenues within the creative arts, allowing them to determine which outlets they prefer. Should they remain in the program and uphold the admission requirements, students would then be able to choose which classes they would like to pursue, effectively empowering them to control and set up their own curriculum. Regularly scheduled community events would bring nearby residents, as well as the students’ parents, in to the center to create a sense of community and support network. All in all, the creative arts
center will give students a much-needed challenge to current school curriculum while providing them with a much-needed motivation to stay in school.

**Choosing the Setting for Change**

Perhaps the most important consideration in the creation of the Salt City Center for Creative Arts is its location. As a center that would serve students throughout the Syracuse City School District, the physical location of the building would need to be centrally located in the city of Syracuse. In addition, the space the center occupies would need to be large enough for ample classroom space and design intervention.

After thorough research based on location, surrounding demographics, current building usage, and visual observation, I chose to locate the Salt City Center for Creative Arts in a building currently occupied by Cab Fab Cabinet Makers. Located in Syracuse’s north side, this location is actually four, separate buildings joined into one facility. The space features a one-story, open showroom, a four-story warehouse space (the historic Caldwell & Ward foundry), a CMU-based manufacturing space, and a two story residential unit. All four spaces are connected via interior hallways (See Figure 1.1 for facility layout).

Looking at all of the characteristics of the Cab Fab building as well as its location makes it a perfect location for the proposed program and design. The site itself is located centrally not only among the city of Syracuse, but also many relevant landmarks and buildings. The building’s location at 124 Burnet Avenue is located within a one-mile radius of arts centers such as the Everson Museum of
Art, the John H. Mulroy Civic Center, the Community Folk Art Center, etc. More importantly, it is located centrally between the Syracuse City School District’s K-8 and high schools, making it easily accessible to the entire school district and city. This can be seen in Figure 1.2 in the appendix. In addition, the area’s demographics mirror that of the overall city of Syracuse, making it an appropriate location based on community statistics (Figure 1.3).

The structure itself features more than adequate space for the potential program, with approximately 24,825 square feet of usable space. Variety in the types of existing spaces lends itself well to the proposed multi-use, creative arts facility. The existing residential building is well suited to administrative purposes, such as office space and small meeting space. Large, open spaces in the four-story warehouse building and manufacturing space allow for room to play with interesting forms and spatial arrangements. The existing showroom facility features interesting structural elements including exposed structural beams and HVAC and mechanical systems. In addition the space is flooded with light from existing overhead windows and an angled roof structure.

Ultimately, the design for the Salt City Center for Creative Arts needs to encompass a variety of forms and functions within the space to effectively engage students. Large, open expanses provided by the CabFab building lend themselves well to the proposed program and wide array of user needs. Specifically, the classroom spaces need to provide a balance of engaging design as well as non-intrusive design, so students are inspired to create without feeling limited in their endeavors. This idea paired with a stimulating, yet safe design in which students
feel comfortable expressing themselves artistically will create a connection between the students and the center environment.

Spatially, individual classrooms will need to be spread over the warehouse’s four floors in a logically arranged manner. Visual arts spaces will need to be closely clustered, while computer labs and the media library should be fairly centrally located within the entire complex. Bathrooms and auxiliary spaces will need to be located in each major area so that excessive circulation is eliminated.

Public spaces such as the performance/lecture space as well as the gallery will encourage participation from the surrounding community as well as participants’ parents. In addition, designed references to the original architecture and use of the building will encourage the action of creating. The industrial nature of the space will help to promote both vocational skills involved in creating as well as critical thinking skills inherent in the creative arts.
Part II: A Reflective Essay
**Introduction**

Design, like any creative process, requires careful thought, smart research, playful experimentation, and eventual fruition of an impactful work. For every designer, an underlying goal drives his or her passion for creating something both useful and beautiful. For me, design involves empathy for those inhabiting the spaces I create. I design to create positive change in the way people experience their environment and ultimately the world at large.

Every interior environment I create is, in and of itself, a manifestation of this end goal, with its beginning roots grounded in a desire to improve upon the human experience. Through the five phases of interior design – programming, schematic design, design development, contract documentation, and contract administration – this goal must be upheld to the highest degree. The beginnings of my design for the Salt City Center for Creative Arts were no different.

As a creator, some component of any design I produce has a personal connection. While the focus is always on the end user or client, a small part of either the decision to pursue a project or the decisions involved in the function and aesthetics of the design itself are influenced by my own persona. For this particular design, the former describes my personal involvement.

Growing up, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by a family full of educators. My mother was a kindergarten teacher in the Syracuse City School District. I had multiple aunts and uncles in teaching positions, and my grandmother was the vice principal of two schools within the city of Syracuse.
 Needless to say, my life was full of learning, and my success as a student was something that was, to me, inherently valuable from a young age.

   As a Syracuse native, I also witnessed firsthand the vast differences in how people viewed education within the city. My parents transcended the parent-teacher boundary, and because of this, I often found it difficult to understand why some of my classmates weren’t pushed to do better, try harder, or to even care. As I grew older, the realities became more and more apparent to me – some students’ parents were unavailable, emotionally or physically, and some were abusive. On top of this, the curricula in schools seemed to be getting more and more focused on standardization, stripping students of their individuality and their creativity while leaving little to motivate already disillusioned students.

   Again, I was fortunate in that my family supported not only my academics, but also my passions and talents. I had developed a love for the visual arts at a young age, and that passion continues to make up a large part of who I am today. Now, it seems that many public schools are eliminating creative arts from their programs – a decision that can be attributed, in part, to the effects of No Child Left Behind. This decision only hinders an already crippled system.

   Although I chose to study Environmental and Interior Design, I never abandoned my love for education. Because of this, I chose to investigate the possibilities of improving a dire academic situation for an under-served population, leading to the creation of the finished design for the Salt City Center for Creative Arts.
Programming: The Development of an Idea

In terms of interior design, the programming phase involves collecting information about the client needs – functional or otherwise, aesthetic expectations, and existing as well as future spatial requirements.37 As discussed in Part I of this essay, programming for this design involved the establishment of a need. Again, this need involved giving students motivation to learn, as well as an outlet to deal with issues occurring outside of the classroom. After months of thorough research and ideation, my solution to this need emerged as a creative arts center, which I then began to create an informed design for.

Aside from traditional research, this part of my process involved visual and conceptual research as well. Additionally, this stage of my design moved from a more academic background to a more artistic one. That being said, all of the aesthetic decisions I made were carefully informed by the need to facilitate the end goal of the space.

The transition from traditional research to design implementation is not one that always comes with ease – taking something largely academic and applying it in an abstract manner comes with much frustration and critical thought. Because of this, I found it necessary to boil down my goals for the space into a few essential words or a short phrase, as the process of abstracting something can be subtractive in nature.

There were many important questions to address in order to make this decision. Why do I want to help these students? How can this help them after they move on from high school? What am I really trying to help them achieve? Eventually, the realization struck that my goals in designing this space were to empower inner city students to gain control of their own pursuit of better, more fruitful lives. Condensing this idea further led me to adopt a catch phrase of sorts for the design – empowered pursuit.

While this step was undoubtedly helpful in moving towards the more aesthetic side of my design, I still struggled with taking what I had researched and creating an effective design in response. How do you visualize such an abstract concept? However, as a designer, this was my one job – to create something visual that reflects an idea or concept. In my struggle to shift my frame of mind back into that of a creator, I began conceptual research in the form of sketches and models that represented the words “empowered pursuit.”

Starting this process, I further dissected what each, individual word represented to me. In part, I played a game of word association. Thinking of empowerment brought up ideas of strength, verticality, and structure. When thinking about pursuit, I imagined things such as a path, fulfillment, and growth. This constant deconstruction of ideas led to the creation of a few conceptual models (seen in Figures 2.1 through 2.4 in the appendix).

The progression of models focused on a few key elements that visually reflected the idea of empowered pursuit. Triangular forms were explored due to their use in existing architecture, as triangles are often seen in structures requiring a
lot of strength, specifically bridges. This is because the triangle is the strongest sculptural shape. Additionally, structural columns and beams within my existing building created triangular forms in the negative spaces where they intersected. Knowing this, my intent was to eventually repeat this form throughout the final space.

Within my conceptual modeling, this visual motif is explored most fully in the first model (Figure 2.1), where planar triangles fan out from the base, with a single piercing element rising against the rest. This piercing element, paired with the general upward motion of the other triangles, emphasized a strong verticality and a definite direction (accentuating the idea of pursuit). Additionally, the piercing element was intended to represent success in spite of adversity – which was represented by the opposing triangular forms – therefore referencing my end goals for the students occupying the center.

Revisiting the idea of a bridge emphasized a connection or path from one place to another, adding to my idea of pursuit. This was explored further in the second model (Figure 2.2). In this exploration, a series of geometric figures grow along a path, changing from smaller, more enclosed forms to larger, more open ones. This change in form and scale emphasized the idea of empowerment, as the subject became more visually confident. For me, the first model was the stronger of the two, as the second model strayed from the idea of empowerment and was more visually linked to the idea of pursuit.

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Within the design process, I’ve found that adding constraints can often help generate more focused, meaningful work. Realizing this, I moved to conceptual modeling within the context of my space (Figures 2.3 and 2.4). In these models, I explored the use of layered angles (shown in the first iteration) with an upward emphasis. In addition, I began to explore the interaction between my conceptual forms and light. The incorporation of light is often seen in religious architecture, where this light is used to emphasize empowerment or enlightenment through a deity. While the intent behind my design was not to evoke the idea of a church, this idea, conceptually, was one that I found to be useful, especially in emphasizing direction and creating visual impact.

Throughout the model-making process, I found a few motifs to repeat themselves and really inspire me. These included angular forms, verticality, and the use of light. Similarly, another idea became of particular interest to me. Upon completion of the first model, I found that looking at it from any view created an interesting and dynamic experience. As a spatial designer, it is absolutely necessary to consider a designed element from multiple angles. I also wanted to highlight the ability of the end user to view the designed space from a variety of perspectives even more.

While much of a designer’s work stems from his or her own ideation, a large portion also comes from the influence of others’ work. My own process was no different. In concurrence with my own conceptualizations, I scoured an array of resources in search of inspiration. This visual research was collected from various design magazines, blogs, and from my own observations – especially of
the existing space. With my existing motifs in mind, I looked for forms and spaces that mimicked what I thought my completed design should resemble.

One work of particular interest was a project called the Arthouse Café by Hong Kong-based architect and designer, Joey Ho (see Figure 2.5 in the appendix). This design, juxtaposed within a larger design for a 3000 square foot gallery, featured large expanses of sculptural triangles that gave the viewer the experience of being able to see through “windows” of space. From a conceptual standpoint, I was intrigued by the use of perspective within the design. In my final design, I used this idea as inspiration to create multiple viewing points within the space. However, my approach was to open up spaces between floors, creating small atriums within the building and therefore empowering the viewer to see beyond their own immediate environment. Similarly, in my completed design, I elected to use triangular forms arranged in a similar manner. However, instead of using the forms themselves as divisions between rooms, I used them to tie the individual areas together and create a visual identity for the center.

Another source of inspiration was the design for the creativeLIVE space in San Francisco, California. The space, designed by the team at Build LLC, featured many existing structural elements including angled ceilings and roofs, exposed mechanical systems, and open structural beams and columns. I was particularly influenced by the openness of the space and how the designers chose to embrace the existing structure of the building rather than fight against it. I took inspiration from this and chose to celebrate the existing industrial nature of the building my space would exist in. Additionally, the lighting in the space was especially
inspiring for me, as it changed the viewer’s perception of the space entirely versus when it was not lit. Dramatic and colorful purple and pinkish lighting created a vibrant feeling against an unadorned, industrial backdrop. Moving forward, this motivated me to incorporate color in a carefully selected but lively manner.

Schematic Design: Implementation of Space

Any designer or creator is charged with the unique task of creating something based in the conceptual or ideal. A musician can evoke an emotion or spirit through a melody. A painter can tell a story with a brush. A designer has the unique task of creating something both functional and beautiful – something that promotes an idea while upholding the needs and safety of those who experience it. This bridge between the aesthetic and the practical is central to the schematic design phase. In this stage, the designer executes initial design decisions in the context of the existing space. Armed with my own experimentation and visual cues from other designers, I was able to rapidly move from programming to initial implementation.

From a purely logical standpoint, I began to arrange the spaces I had identified in Part I in the context of the existing building. These spaces include a reception and gallery space, a Black Box theater for performances and lectures, conference rooms, student and staff lounges, administrative offices, bathrooms, mechanical rooms, storage, and studio spaces. Specifically, the studio spaces include movement, music, visual arts, ceramics, sculpture, language, and

computer arts. Additional spaces included a media library, kiln room, dark room, and changing room.

At this point, I created an adjacency matrix as well as multiple bubble diagrams (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). These visual tools aid designers in identifying which spaces need to be near to each other. Strictly in terms of one-another, I thoughtfully considered which spaces would need to be closest to which. Initially, I grouped spaces into smaller categories by type – public spaces, administrative spaces, and classroom spaces. Public spaces, including the reception, gallery, and Black Box Theater would need to be close to one another, as well as the administrative offices. Additionally, a semi-public space would be necessary to connect the reception and gallery to the classroom spaces.

Moving into more specificity, I focused my attention on the classroom spaces. Because of their spatial requirements, the ceramics and sculpture studios would absolutely need to be close to one another – preferably on the ground floor due to the weight and bulk of the works that would be produced there. Ideally, the visual arts studio would be nearby as well. Similarly, the movement and music studios would be best situated near one-another and more removed from the bulk of the studios due to their noisy nature. The media library, computer lab, and language studio, additionally, would mix together well as they are linked largely by technology. Logically, each grouping of spaces would need to be closely adjacent to bathrooms as well as a means of egress.

As a designer, I faced the distinct challenge of applying the ideal to the real. In this instance, the ideal involved the conditions and spatial arrangements
described previously – the reality of the existing structure led to a slightly altered plan. Shifting to implementation within the space, I knew two things. The first was that the entry would need to be impactful and inspiring. The second was that the classrooms would need to be clustered together. With this in mind, I decided to incorporate the studios in the existing four-story warehouse building and adjacent showroom (Figure 3.3).

Having made this decision, I needed to relocate the main entrance to the building. In its original form, the main entrance was located in the showroom building. This space featured most of the original, exposed structural components that I had been inspired by initially. Because of this, I wanted to keep this particular space as close to its original state as possible. Knowing the impact I wanted the new entrance to make, this space simply would not be a good fit.

Ultimately, I moved the main entrance to the existing shipping and receiving dock immediately adjacent to the manufacturing facility. On the exterior, this space was located just off of a gravel lot with plenty of space for busses to drop off and pick up students, as well as ample opportunity for a new parking lot to be put in place. Additionally, this allowed for the existing parking lot to be converted into an outdoor greenspace. This area also boasted two floors, providing me with the opportunity to open up the space and incorporate a vertically oriented design element into the space.

Immediately contiguous to the entry, I placed the reception area as well as the main student gallery space. In this way, I designed the space so that anyone who entered the center would not be able to avoid experiencing the students’
work. This decision supports the needs of at-risk students in the city of Syracuse as it, in some manner, begins the process of involving parents as well as the community.

Additionally, I placed the administrative offices in the existing residential building and the Black Box theater directly next to the reception area. A student lounge was designed above and open to the entry, establishing the students’ ability to see the design from a variety of viewpoints. To connect these areas to the student-centered classrooms, I designed a series of existing nooks and small rooms to be a main corridor. More specifically, this hallway connects the public reception area to the administrative offices, the more removed movement studio, and the newly formed greenspace without interrupting the layout of the other studio spaces.

Perhaps the largest deciding factor in the arrangement of the studio spaces was my decision to completely remove the fourth floor of the warehouse building. Doing so created a strongly vertical emphasis and allowed for more light to penetrate the lower spaces. Additionally, removing only the floor highlighted the existing structural grid on the third and fourth floor. This motif was repeated, although on a smaller scale, on the second and third floor, where I removed a portion of the existing floor to create a central atrium surrounded by student lounges. In this area, the structural beams and columns were left, emphasizing the existing architecture.

Because of this, remaining space was limited and I therefore made a few changes to my original program. On the first floor of the warehouse building, I
placed two separate studios – the ceramics studio and the sculpture studio. The second floor contained the music studios as well as the computer lab (the home of both the computer and language arts studios). The visual arts studio, printing area, and media library were placed on the third floor, with the movement studio in the existing showroom building. This location was optimal for the movement studio due to a lack of a column grid – in short, there were less existing structural components to inhibit any activity. For a visual summary, see Figure 3.4 in the appendix for a final space plan.

**Schematic Design: Conceptualization of Form**

Prior to finalizing a space plan, applying a visual concept to the space in a sensitive way was something I struggled with. While I had relatively few issues with producing a design concept, deciding exactly how and where to implement said concepts became difficult at times. Starting at the entry I wanted to create a designed element that would make an impressive and inspiring statement for both the students and their parents, evoking a feeling of prestige. Again, my intent was to pique the interest of parents as well as members of the community. One way to get parents involved could be to give them the idea that their children were attending an esteemed program. Afterall, children can be an extension of their parents’ success.

With this in mind, I referenced my original conceptual model work, specifically the three motifs I found most important. Again, these motifs included the use of angular forms, the emphasis of verticality, and the use of light. From
these original ideas, I designed a fundamentally sculptural piece to be located on
the wall opposite the main entry. This element would be comprised of individual
triangular panels growing and changing into different volumes. This growing
element, while referencing my original conceptual intentions of strength and
pursuit, was also inspired by the growth of crystalline structures (see Figure 4.1)
Specifically, I was influenced by one of the city’s nicknames – the Salt City.
Additionally, this designed element symbolized the idea of pursuit through its
strong verticality and visual references to growth and change.

My major intent for the existing structure of the building was that it was
accepted and celebrated while still allowing me to showcase my own design
interventions. In doing this, I embraced what existed while visually changing it
into something better. Symbolically, this was parallel to the experience I intended
for my end user – the students. Because of this, I elected to leave the majority of
the existing finishes within the space. These included concrete, masonry, brick,
steel, and wood. Additionally, keeping these neutral materials was well-suited to
the needs of a studio space, where the environment could easily become too
stimulating or distract from the students’ work.

Keeping this in mind, material selection became a major consideration for
the sculptural element. This was as important (if not more important) to consider
than the form itself as it could easily become overwhelming. The process of
designing a space for me is a constant loop – at every stage I’m constantly
revisiting prior phases including original research, visual inspiration, and initial
ideation. Looking back to my model work, as well as other designers’ work, I found that interesting use of light was lacking from my initial design.

Knowing this, I looked into a variety of materials that would facilitate the use of lighting in an interesting way. Additionally, I knew that I wanted this element to include a variety of vibrant colors in some way so that it would serve as inspiration in contrast with the natural, existing industrial environment. Eventually, I discovered a lightweight resin material that included programmable LED lights along the full color spectrum. With this, I intended to give the sculptural element a dynamic nature as it would gradate through a rainbow of colors slowly throughout the day, similar to the effect seen with fiber-optic novelty lamps (Figure 4.2).

As one of the first elements the users would see, I designed this piece to act as a visual identity for the building. Because of this, I felt it was essential to include similar elements as well as details mimicking the angled throughout the building. At first, I struggled with deciding where to incorporate these specific elements. I was thrilled with the design concept I had come up with and was almost too eager to include it in as many ways and places as I could. I incorporated growing, tiered forms throughout the space that doubled as seating. I designed crystalline, angular forms encasing the entire corridor. Frankly, I started to go overboard. At this point, with guidance from my project advisor, I gave myself an intervention. Much like a writer, I needed to listen to the often-quoted saying, “Kill your darlings.”
In this stage I revisited my floor plan. Again, placing restrictions on myself helped in controlling my design process and making my decisions more thoughtful. With a solidified space plan, implementing visual concepts became a much easier and more informed task. After some thought, I settled on implementing the largely sculptural elements only where I made a significant design intervention. From this two key places to incorporate additional sculptural elements emerged - the reception desk and the atrium running through the student lounges (see Figure 4.3). Additionally, I designed the sculptural seating elements in the newly enclosed corridor as well as in the student lounges (around where the floor was demolished).

**Design Development to Completion**

As the final stage before production-mode sets in, the design development phase involves solidifying design concepts and spatial arrangements, as well as more finalize consideration of furniture, fixtures, finishes, and equipment. For me, this phase primarily involved deciding upon specific materials, lighting, and furniture. Outside of the designed sculptural elements described previously, I specified lights and furniture that referenced angular, geometric forms. Doing so emphasized the motifs I chose in both a sculptural and planar manner without visually overwhelming the space. These furniture, fixtures, and finishes selections can be seen in Figure 4.4 in the appendix.

A major goal of the specified fixtures and furniture was to allow for customization within the designed environment. This ability to modify the spaces
in which the students created was a small way to actively empower them.

Moveable gallery walls gave them the freedom to customize not only the pieces they created, but also the manner in which it is displayed. The relatively “undeveloped” nature of the Black Box Theater gave them ample opportunity to change the style of the performances they would produce. Temporary practice booths as well as modular seating elements further allowed them to customize the individual context in which they would work.

With these choices set, the process of “designing” was more or less complete, with only the possibility of small technical details slightly altering the design. With nearly all designing behind me, I completed the contract document phase. Although this is only the fourth out of five design phases, it is the last part of my process to be documented. In this phase, a final set of construction documents are produced to a level of detail where the space could actually be built.\(^\text{40}\) While a fifth phase of design exists, this project did not enter that stage. Because of the design’s hypothetical nature, the contract administration phase was not executed. In this phase, competitive bids and construction of the space would have been completed.\(^\text{41}\)

Regardless, completion of the contract documents proved to be a challenge. Transitioning from the creative to the mechanical requires a shift of mindset that, sometimes, I end up stalling on. For me, there is always something more that can be done – a light added here, a dimension changed there. Deciding


when enough is enough, letting go, and simply producing somehow consistently seems like giving up on the design. However, finalizing the design in such a way that allows for the users to fully experience it while also giving them the freedom to create their own experiences within it is a necessary and gratifying step. In fact, it was essential to the concept and goals for the Salt City Center for the Creative Arts. Design should create something that serves as a catalyst or backdrop for positive change within the lives of those it affects, not the change itself.


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Appendices

**Figure 1.1: Existing Site Conditions**

**Figure 1.2: Site Location Analysis**
Figure 1.3: Community Demographics
Figure 2.1: Conceptual Modeling & Sketches
Figure 2.2: Conceptual Modeling & Sketches
Figure 2.3: Conceptual Modeling & Sketches
Figure 2.4: Conceptual Modeling & Sketches
Figure 2.6: Build LLC, *Build LLC creativeLIVE Party Hall*, 2013, digital photograph. Build LLC, Seattle, <http://blog.buildllc.com/2013/07/creativelive-san-francisco-part-3-lofts-mezzanine-deck/>

Figure 3.1: Adjacency Matrix
Figure 3.2: Bubble Diagrams

Figure 3.3: Classroom Spaces
Figure 4.1: Sculptural Element Progress

Figure 4.3: Sculptural Element Placement

Figure 4.4: Material, Finish & Furniture Selections
Thesis Documentation

Illustration 1.1: Entry Rendering

Illustration 1.2: Snack Bar with view of Upper Entry Rendering
Illustration 2.1: Reception & Gallery Rendering

Illustration 3.1: Lower Atrium Student Lounge
Illustration 3.2: Upper Atrium Student Lounge & Media Library