Spring 5-1-2007

Design Outfit An Interdisciplinary Think + Act Tank

Douglas Jack

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ABSTRACT

The Design Outfit is a real project derived from a conceptual program. The program, or set of concepts from which the project sprang, critically approached three aspects of design practice:

I) reality: how design proceeds from initial sketches to finishing touches, with all steps and scales given comparable attention

II) collaboration: how designers interface with one another and others throughout a design process

III) social awareness: how designers can shape and place their efforts in relation to social significance

The project was designed to explore and test these aspects of design.

Based at Henninger High, a public Syracuse City school located on the north side, a group of Syracuse University students paired with a group of high school students to lead a design exploration. Their ultimate goal was to design and build an installation at the school, but the process itself was also approached as a product.

The first of two semesters consisted primarily of design lessons lead by the Syracuse University students. The collaborative strategy was to engage and teach the high school students while simultaneously extrapolating from discussions the ways in which the school facility and culture operated. From this understanding came the beginnings of a design.

In the second semester, Syracuse University students focused their efforts on developing and realizing a design. They interfaced primarily with three parties: the high school community, craft technicians, and the school district bureaucracy. Unexpected turns and barriers became the norm, ultimately leading to behind-schedule production and a minimal chance of the installation being realized in site.

The process essentially became the product, and a compilation of text and images recapitulates and critiques the exploration.
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This document explains and explores the Design Outfit in two parts. The first is devoted to the program—a set of concepts and a projection as to how they can inform actions—and intellectually grounds these concepts. The second recapitulates the project, Design Outfit @ Henninger High, where the tidy concepts met messy realities.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Two Syracuse University professors were central to the program development for this project. Jonathan Massey, Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture and my Capstone Advisor, worked with me from the earliest brainstorming stages, helping me move from an attempt to solve all the problems of the world to one that critically and carefully addresses a few. Sari Knopp Biklen, Professor in the School of Education and my Honors Reader, introduced me to qualitative research practices through her course Youth, Schooling and Popular Culture, and her embrace of the multifaceted and imperfect centrally factored into the nature of this project and document.

A handful of Syracuse University faculty and staff were central to the realization of the project. Pamela Heintz and Roberta Gillen of the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service connected me with an appropriate community context, then advised throughout on how to carefully approach cross-cultural relationships. Eric Holzwarth of the Renée Crown University Honors Program provided logistical feedback from the beginning, and entered the process himself to assist when a maelstrom arrived.

Two people from the College of Visual and Performing Arts played significant roles in the design stages of the project. Matthew Gehring, assistant professor in the Department of Art, embraced my work on the project as part of his Site
Specific Sculpture and Installation course, which encouraged us to tune aesthetic dimensions of the design. Steven Ginsburg, technician for the Department of Art's woodshop facilities, patiently shared his well-honed wood working skills with us, first in developing details then in realizing them.

The project is indebted to The Renée Crown University Honors Program, financially for the funding they provided, and academically for the educational framework their program provided me.

At Henninger High two members of the staff played vital roles. David Cecile, the school's Principal, was receptive from the outset and provided crucial support when we met bureaucratic snags. Robert Bezy, a guidance counselor, surpassed all advisors in time and energy devoted to the project, attending all sessions and planning the logistics with me behind the scenes. He was the hinge that connected the Syracuse University and Henninger High communities and as such fundamentally enabled the project, yet was always humble in his role.

Lastly there was the Outfit itself, the group of students who came together to partake in a Design exploration. There were nine consistent student participants, other than myself.

Alaina Conner: Syracuse University Junior, Surface Pattern Design
Jacqueline Cruz: Henninger High Sophomore
Kathleen Cruz: Henninger High Sophomore
Molly Egloff: Henninger High Senior
Prisilla Kabba: Henninger High Freshman
Ashley Roark: Syracuse University Junior, Industrial Design
Andrew Steingiser: Syracuse University Senior, Architecture
Michael Williams: Henninger High Senior
Adam Vigna: Syracuse University Senior, Film

These student participants, the Outfit, formed the productive core of this project. Without them, there would not have been a project, just a romantic program.
View the Honors Capstone Project, and all that you do, as an opportunity, not a responsibility.

The Honors curriculum has been changed since I began this project and now technically contradicts this suggestion; all Honors students must complete a Capstone project to graduate from the program. But I suggest it as a mentality more than a reality. We will always be required to perform productive tasks, often not by our own choosing, but striving to make them opportunity-ridden journeys rather than pre-destined trudges can make a significant difference.
PROGRAM

the conceptual framework
"All design work starts from the premise of this physical, objective sensuousness of architecture, of its materials. To experience architecture in a concrete way means to touch, see, hear, and smell it. To discover and consciously work with these qualities—these are the themes of our teaching."

Peter Zumthor, "Teaching Architecture, Learning Architecture," Thinking Architecture (66)

After completing my second year of architecture school, my father, a woodworker by hobby, came to me seeking direction in the design and construction of a woodshop to be placed in our backyard. Weary at first, I quickly overcame that sentiment. I had taken on far larger structures in design studios—libraries, community centers and athletic facilities—and I was entering my third summer of work in an architecture firm.

I soon discovered I was far from prepared for that job. Simple as it seemed, the reality of a 20 by 24 foot structure was extraordinarily complex. There were a slew of ready-made solutions to resolve the complexities—trade books with standard details, stock materials at Home Depot, local builders with established methods—but my training up to that point had not prepared me to navigate outside chartered territory in this real-world realm.
The program's first approach towards design sprung from this experience.

Through this project, students would develop a sensibility towards the "realness" of design: how materials are selected, prepared and assembled; how designers interact with clients, contexts and codes; how a budget is accounted for. These realities would be integral considerations throughout the process: a part of design, not afterthoughts.

This approach runs the risk of sounding nostalgic in the midst of a digital era that posits as much in online space as it does physical space. Peter Zumthor, quoted above to capture his love of materiality in design, insists on a classical definition of architecture when in the same essay he writes: "Architecture is always a concrete matter" (66). I empathize with Peter when I experience a building such as Zaha Hadid’s Spittelau Housing, the result of design process that ends with the alluring rendering. From a distance, the forms are intriguing, but as one approaches no finer level of detail emerges. They are angular white boxes on stilts, from three hundred feet away and three feet away.

But I also see a close correlation between architecture, in its classic definition, and other forms of design, if not room for other forms of design to be considered Architecture. The chairs we sit in and desks we work at, computers we work on and online realms we enter, are as a much of part of our 21st century reality as physical shelter. Likewise, categorical lines often become hazy with inventive design. Contemporary artist Krzysztof Wodiczko projects parts of people’s bodies onto buildings, then broadcasts their voices, sometimes pre-recorded and other
times in real-time. The result is not just a building with a projection on its surface. The building becomes the person, the person the building, and the whole is neither architecture nor art, but a condition of symbiosis between the two.
The program's second approach towards design was that collaboration, both horizontal and vertical, would be essential to the process. To some extent this was inevitable. The project strove to realize a design in a community, and that challenge that would necessitate the involvement of many parties working in close coordination. But embracing collaboration would shape a fundamentally different process than merely accepting it.

The Bauhaus, an arts and architecture institution of Weimar Germany that existed between World Wars I and II, approached professional collaboration with intention. Walter Gropius, the first director of the school, established two distinct positions for faculty: Formmeisters, or artists, and Werkmeisters, or craftspeople. Students split their educations between the two areas, and were suppose to integrate the skills that were, according to Gropius, typically segregated. The educational paradigm aimed to bridge the divide between design and making typically traced back to Filippo Brunelleschi and the Italian Renaissance, but which exponentially expanded with the Industrial Revolution.

Increasing disciplinary sophistication and professional specialization necessitates that such efforts be made to bridge divides in understanding. The question becomes how effectively interface between professions. To what extent do we learn and assume another's skills ourselves, and at what point do we hand-off...
and trust another's judgment? These disciplinary lines are difficult to draw, but perhaps beyond all else, necessitate patience and tolerance to navigate.

Embracing collaboration is being prepared to both teach and learn, and having patience in either position. It is seeking out and incorporating the input of others in increments throughout a process, not working in isolation then handing off a hermetic resolution.
SOCIAL AWARENESS

Early inspiration for an intentional approach towards social awareness came from working in an architectural office during my first few summers after graduating high school. It was a mid-sized office of architects and interior designers, and their work was primarily residential. As is the case with most things designed by "Architects," these were far from Everyman suburban residences. They were ocean-front mansions reached by long winding driveways, gems nestled in finely manicured landscapes, luxurious cocoons that encased the private lives of a few wealthy patrons. Forty trained professionals devoted their creative energies towards the design and making of a few of these each year.

This condition became my qualm with the social impact of conventional architectural practice: that so much professional talent is expended on projects of such limited scope and high cost—projects that were socially complacent. The result is something of a design gulf: a small percentage of the built environment is designed in an original, thoughtful way, while the vast majority relies heavily on conventional, uninspired solutions. In the Prologue to his collection of essays, *Good Deeds, Good Design*, Bryan Bell quotes a 1995 *Philadelphia Inquirer* statistic that two percent of new homebuyers work directly with an Architect, a quantification of my empirical observations.
Design—taken in an inclusive sense as creation and composition—reaches all people. But the quality and specificity of design corresponds closely to the clients and contexts it serves. Sidewalks on Syracuse's south side are aggregations of broken fragments with shrubs sprouting between, hardly navigable by foot, while those in the Eastwood historic district are smooth and lined with trimmed hedges. Some of the distinctions are cultural and permissible, but others are systemic and unjust.

This project would approach social awareness in two ways. First, it would place design efforts in the service of clients and contexts that were systemically avoided, and second it would aim to reach groups over individuals, and employ design and production modes that maximize the proportion of output to input.
PROJECT

design outfit @ henninger high
PHASE I

In the Fall of 2005, with the program loosely established, I began to formulate and pursue a specific project. Based on experiences volunteering at a local middle school, I was familiar with the aged and overburdened state of the public Syracuse City School District (SCSD) facilities, and was excited about the potential of working with teenage students. Through a fortuitous sequence of events I shared my ideas with The Mary Anne Shaw Center for Public and Community Service at Syracuse University, and they gave enthusiastic support. Together we arrived at Henninger High, a public city school on the north side, as the site for the project.

That semester I also brought the ideas to Henninger High personnel: first, three staff members, then the school principal and a handful of related faculty. The challenge for me was to solidify the project specifics enough that people would feel confident and clear about what they were being asked to support, but to also leave space for the project's course to be altered en route.
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(978)223-0642

Syracuse University
School of Architecture
4th year of 5, BArch

PROJECT ABSTRACT
Wednesday, December 14, 2005

ARCHITECTURAL THESIS: Spring '07

Architecture, as it exists today, is an incredibly exclusive art. Reserved for only those who have an excess of means to afford it, Architecture—as opposed to under designed, poorly constructed building—accounts for a mere two-percent of buildings today. How can well designed, well constructed building—Architecture—be brought to a larger portion of the population and built environment?

HONORS THESIS: Fall '06

With this theme as a guiding principle, high school students will be engaged in a semester-long program in which they will work with SU students to design then build furniture-scale elements for use in their school. In chronological order, the program will consist of:

- lessons on architecture and construction
- evaluation of the students' school facilities
- decision on a manageable design project addressing the facilities
- design/construction of elements

Central to its success will be the alignment of participant interests. For high school students, the program will be an intensive introduction to design and construction, an avenue for further pursuing interests in these fields. For SU students, the program will be an opportunity to do real design and real construction for real people, a compliment to theoretical studies on campus. For Doug it will be an introduction to the act of forming and directing a design program, and an investigation into the themes of his architectural thesis.

The diversity of participants will also be central to the program's success. Countering the common misconception that architecture is merely a matter of technology and numbers, high school students with a variety of interests—art, English, music, etc.—will be invited to participate. Syracuse University students will come from various departments—interior design, industrial design, education, etc.—with the idea that streamlining design and construction requires effective collaboration between trades, not isolation.

At Henninger High, SU and high school students will meet for one period one day a week from September to December. The school's shop facilities will be used for construction portions of the program, with materials funded by University grants.
My feelings towards the Henninger High building were mixed in these first personal encounters with it. The exterior is starkly simple with a few masses linearly arranged, and paired with my understanding of the school district's strapped budget I at first associated it with singularly utilitarian public works. But finer details suggest that the simplicity is intentionally achieved. Each mass has a single type of cladding so reads as a distinct entity, but the modules are selected with a range of tones to create variation within the order. Openings are made in either full breaks or selective punctures—leaving the integrity of the entity they pierce intact—and happen in coordination with the spacing of materials.
PROJECT: phase I
While these aspects of the exterior were visually appealing, the interiors were far less so. There was also a basic ineptitude in the building's complete omission of classroom windows. School personnel explained with contempt that the building was designed in the wake of the energy crisis of the 1970s, and that windows were omitted to conserve energy. Given the design's attention to detail, and living today amidst a resurgence of environmental sensitivity in design, Henninger High seems to be a proud product of its time that, thirty years later, has found itself in a very different context for which it is less fit.

The school is slated to be substantially renovated between 2012 and 2014 as part of the third of four phases in the Master Plan of the District-Wide Reconstruction Project. Until then, the school community will continue to re-outfit the facility with the means they can control: commercially available, movable elements like desks, tables, and bookshelves.
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As the project's formal Fall 2006 start neared, it became necessary to solidify the group and project. I grappled at length with these steps, for they were some of the first that were irrevocable. What would we be called? How would I frame, simply, the complex motivations of the group? What would our graphic identity be? The moves were like placing the wet lump of clay that I had been tinkering with for so long into a kiln, or so they felt.
Designers from different disciplines band
To share understanding and skills of design
With students of a syracuse city high school.

Through guided analyses based in the school,
All students together conceive a design,
Then build it...or at least that’s the plan.

Join in for the Fall ’06 Collaborative plunge. Should be rewarding.
contact _ doug jack : dsjack@syr.edu _ by fri sept. 1
I settled on a name, the Design Outfit, which captured a couple of the primary elements of the group and project: first, a group of people whose collective focus is design, and second, design for a sort of clothing.

The analogy to clothing resonated powerfully for me. Clothing is rarely one-of-a-kind, but never looks the same on different people; covers portions of the body and exposes others, mediating public and private realms; has character; serves some base functions but is, or can be, much more than a utilitarian solution. Our project at Henninger High could be thought of as a change of clothes for the school.
The first attempt to recruit other Syracuse University students happened from the top down through faculty recommendations. I thought students would take the opportunity more seriously coming from an elder, and that the message would spread quickly and easily. Early attempts at this stuttered, so I switched to a bottom-up strategy, notifying students with flyers, emails, and impromptu conversation. It also seemed that this approach would help deter professor-pleasers and attract those with genuine interest, and that the latter would propel the project more sustainably than the former.

The pocket-sized quarter-page flyer became the primary mode of dissemination, and I developed a design that aimed to be appealing yet unpretentious. There exists a genre of student organization and event flyers that follow this unspoken code: be creative without purporting to be superior; present your program as it is, without insisting that all admire and attend. Their lure is from the apparent lack of lure.
Seven Syracuse University students from a variety of departments responded: three from Industrial Design, two from Geography, one from Fashion Design, and one from Surface Pattern Design. Communication with many of those dissipated after my first email response. Three met with me personally to discuss the project and their potential role in it, and of those three two committed to participation. The third had a time conflict.

So we were an Industrial Designer, a Surface Pattern Designer, and an Architect. We also had a friend of mine, a Film minor, interested in documenting the process.

Henninger High students were recruited through flyers on walls and some impromptu classroom presentations that arose as we were posting. Students were invited to attend a general interest meeting, and after a first attempt drew only a few students we held a second. We came away with eight students who committed to participating.
WOODWORKING

EYE PROTECTION REQUIRED

PROJECT: phase I
The Henninger High students were to receive tool kits to aid their pursuit of design. The Syracuse University students together created a list of tools, with the intention of leaving the capacity for students’ pursuits to continue after our project. Students would essentially receive the same tools that we used on a daily basis, enabling them to progress to our skill level.
design outfit : 25

PROJECT : phase I
Our first attempt at a session with both Syracuse University and Henninger High students together did not happen as planned. We, the Syracuse University students, arrived a few minutes late on a day when Henninger High students had been sent home early after a fairly large fight broke out, and that few minutes was enough for the Henninger High staff to send our students home. After a short while of disappointedly waiting in defeat to reschedule our meeting, one of our Senior students entered the room. She and the other Senior had both stayed after school for other activities and could meet with us now. So the seven of us—four Syracuse University students, two Henninger High students, and our staff advisor—informally met and conversed around a small table. While it was not the extensive introduction we had planned, it had its own catalytic quality.
The following week we successfully brought everyone together, as we would for the hour and a half following school most Fridays for the remainder of the semester. Three of the Henninger High students withdrew before this first meeting, but the five remaining—two seniors, two sophomores and a freshman—would attend consistently.

For this first session the Henninger High students were asked to bring an object of interest, and one brought a Von Dutch purse. "It cost $250," she said, and I asked why. "Because it's a Von Dutch," she responded. "It was given to me as a gift, and the giver wanted me to know that I was special to them." Another SU student asked how it was different than a $10 purse, and they again turned to the name-brand recognition. "What about the durability and the stitch work, the performance of the purse?" we asked. I was thinking of Kenneth Frampton's discussion in "The Case for the Tectonic" of ontological versus representational forms, and trying to get them to see the purse behind the brand. Unenthusiastic grunts were the response.

This evolved into the strategy of our early direction of Henninger High students: to search for, then follow, their enthusiasm. How did they view their high school environment? What aspects were poignant and important to them?
design outfit : 28

PROJECT : phase I
Somehow we began discussing the ceiling of our basement classroom. It was of raw concrete, and the mechanical equipment hung below it was left exposed. There were signs of makeshift repair work and other markings of old age. "It's disgusting," the Henninger High students erupted, with cringes accompanying the complaints. It was their cultured reaction, a reflection of common preconceived perceptions.

This led into the last activity for the day, to first describe the ceiling in writing, then to envision an alteration to it. Students became less reactionary in their descriptions but still struggled to understand without passing judgment, to see commonplace things anew. Their alterations were similarly unoriginal: paint the ceiling or add a chandelier, somehow make it "pretty."
design outfit: 30

PROJECT: phase I
I was unable to make the second group session, but the others went without me. This step towards independence happened earlier than I would have liked, but the intention was always to have the group be relatively leaderless. Each week a different SU student was to direct a lesson in their discipline, and Ashley agreed to direct a lesson on Industrial Design that week.

Reports were that all students attended but energy was low. Stretching to follow enthusiasm led to a discussion of city sidewalks, public transportation and trash cans. The challenge for the coming weeks would be to keep students engaged while discussing issues more directly leading towards our end goal, a design for Henninger High.
For our third session I directed a discussion on architecture. It was comprised of two parts, both aiming to encourage students to overcome culturally derived responses. The first part was a game titled *(is this) ARCHITECTURE? and if not, what is it?*, and consisted of asking this question of a series of photos of objects, some overtly "architectural" and others not. The second part was a discussion based on a series of photos of a wide variety of bus stops.

With next to no text on any of the slides, the lesson was loosely planned but not entirely predefined. Bus stops were comparable to the scale of installation we were aiming to do, so raised similar issues: durability, relation to a user, appearance, associations. Through discussions of these factors, students began to see aspects of design they had previously shunned. Now the lagging front was the development of the technical drawing and modeling skills.
In the fourth session we moved from conceptual to project-specific development. We left our basement classroom with sketchbooks in hand and explored the school, talking and drawing.

Our interest was in connecting activities with places, experiences with objects, and students’ stories were on point. They spoke of a few well-known nooks where the security cameras do not reach; of smoking on the steps just outside the main door; of an intimidating group of males that cluster around the base of a stairwell; and of a female being sexually approached by a male in the privacy of a stairwell. Particular activities tended to occur in particular places.

In discussion, Adam made the claim that design cannot change people’s actions. I proposed that their relationship was not one-to-one, but loosely and definitely connected. I probably should have let the students come to that conclusion for themselves, but our explorations for me readily demonstrated this, and without this base belief—that design matters—our efforts were futile. If all benches are just benches, then why design a bench?
design outfit : 36

PROJECT: phase I
Our exploration and discussion lingered on one particularly active area, the cafeteria. Students spoke of the chaos of an overcrowded lunch, and of the systems by which coveted cafeteria seats are acquired. Some barter for seats with food. Prisilla, our effervescent Freshman, has friends willing to reserve her a seat. Many, if not most, eat outside of the cafeteria. Molly, our self-confident and independent Senior, eats in a nearby classroom while Michael, our social Senior, floats between groups while standing. Jacqueline and Kathleen, our timid Sophomores, sit on the floor in a wide corridor adjacent to the cafeteria. Students were also able to point out where other individuals and groups routinely eat.

Our fifth and final session was focused on selecting a specific site and beginning to envision how we might alter it. We revisited the previous week’s cafeteria discussions, and thought of reshuffling the social ordering while better accommodating more students. Students perceived the wide corridor adjacent to the cafeteria as an outside space, a space for those who could not or do not fend the seating system inside. Could this outside space be recast as an inside? A margin turned into a body, a fringe into a center?
Part of the challenge was be pragmatic. Students in the corridor sat on the floor as there was no seating, and often left their trash scattered about as there were no trash cans nearby. They sat with their backs to the walls, forming a sort of gauntlet for passing students, as the corridor’s shape suggested that arrangement. The corridor was not designed as a place to linger and eat, so did not sensibly accommodate these functions. These are a part of its marginal reading.

The other challenge would be atmospheric. Some students actually attracted to the hallway because it was the fringe, a place away from the chaos of the cafeteria and the eyes of others. How could an intervention accommodate and activate without usurping, augment without replacing? These were challenges for our design.

In a quick visit back to the hallway we noticed a set of lockers installed against the cafeteria wall. We began to explore a thin, tall element against that same wall, an installation that was formally comparable to the lockers.

At this point we also solidified a series of technical requirements. The piece would be low maintenance, durable, and removable but difficult to steal. It would be constructed off site, so in modules that could sit in a truck, fit through a door frame, be carried by a few people, and quickly assembled in place.
PHASE II

After a month away from the project between semesters, the Syracuse University student contingent met to discuss our goals. While we agreed that our work with Henninger High students had been productive, we were also determined to reach the larger school community as we had originally set out to do. We decided we would prefer to get something built than to have a perfect product on paper. That was the primary challenge we were seeing to the realization of the piece: how to balance time and quality.

We continued to meet once a week, typically with just the SU students. Our challenge now was to transpose, to bring the ideas and experiences of last semester into a buildable design. The designs would be developed by us, the near-professional designers, but would be periodically brought to the Henninger High student contingent as well as the larger school community for feedback and direction.
The Syracuse University contingent of the Outfit reassembled in a new form after the break. Ashley was registered to receive three independent study credits for her work, so took on a highly active role. Alaina now had a time conflict so couldn't make the regular sessions, and seeing the design after a few weeks of development was hesitant about her participation. There was not a clear role for her skills, and after making some suggestions I left it up to her to propose ideas to the rest of us. Our communication dwindled and I let it be so; anything beyond gentle encouragement did not feel appropriate. Participation in the group was about self-propulsion and seizing opportunity, not being pulled along and performing duties. Adam's participation similarly trailed off, and I also let that be after gently prodding. Andrew Steingiser, a classmate of mine in Architecture who had attended the last session at Henninger High in the Fall, began participating regularly and with enthusiasm.

As we began planning to bring our ideas to the larger school community, we pursued a graphic design student participant. We thought this student could strengthen our public relations and alleviate some of that burden from the rest of us. Three responded to a call, but ultimately none participated.
design outfit : 43

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Last year the course included an announcement for the Design Outfit in the VPA Hot News and it was effective. This semester I am just looking for the message below to reach Comm Design students. Are you aware of another venue for just Comm Design students that I could distribute my announcement through? If not, could you include it in the VPA Hot News?

Many thanks,
-Doug Jack

--- in need of a graphic identity ---

The Design Outfit, an interdisciplinary think+act tank, is looking for an SU student with prime graphic design skills to participate, pronto. They are amidst a design-build project at a local high school, and could use guidance in the creation of and caring for their public identity. Email dejack@esyr.edu for more information.

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In Need of Graphic Identity: Call for Students

The Design Outfit, an interdisciplinary think+act tank, is looking for an SU student with prime graphic design skills to participate, pronto. They are amidst a design-build project at a local high school, and could use guidance in the creation of and caring for their public identity. Email dejack@esyr.edu for more information.

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Glad to hear you’re interested in hearing more about the Design Outfit. Below is a description of the group, and an initial idea of the role a graphic designer could play. Read it, then let me know if you feel interested in participating, or if you’d like to talk further before committing.

Bests – Doug Jack

The Design Outfit is a group of SU students from different design disciplines that came together this past fall under the direction of a fifth year architecture student, Doug Jack. The idea was for this group to design actual products for a contest that quality design doesn’t usually reach, but to do this not singularly as service, rather as an educational opportunity. So it establishes a mutually beneficial relationship to propel design explorations; IE students gain real world design/production exposure, while the contest gets some sort of product(s) that aims to enhance it.

The context for this year’s project is Henninger High, a high school in north Syracuse. Last semester, the Outfit is an architecture, industrial design, film student, and surface pattern designer -- worked with a group of students there to better understand the school facility and culture. This semester we’ve begun to design products, and are working with other school personnel -- faculty, admin, staff -- to gain broader support for the project before it is actually constructed. This is where we are, and where the graphic designer comes into play.

To gain broad community support we’ll need to invite people to presentations then present to them. A graphic designer could design invitations and presentation posters to not only convey the information, but do it with a finesse that no other designers Jack. There will be a handful of small jobs such as these throughout the semester.

The other job we foresee is a graphic presentation of all our year’s work when the project is completed. We’ve been taking photos and documenting our process, but a graphic designer could help to compellingly present the information. This would at least be displayed at the school for an opening reception, but potentially elsewhere, such as the Redhouse Gallery in downtown Syracuse.

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Our first step towards involving the larger school community was to meet with the principal. It seemed odd to not have involved the administration more before this point, and I could not quite explain why we had not. In part, we had been so focused on working with our group of Henninger High students that we had lost sight of the larger community we aimed to ultimately reach. Also, time was passing at breakneck speed relative to our once-a-week meeting schedule.

The principal was at first somewhat abrasive, at one point stating that he felt like he was trying to be sold a car, then asking for clarification. I had been speaking up until that point, and the others—Adam, Molly, and our Henninger High staff advisor, Mr. Bezy—stepped in to respond. The principal eventually became more receptive, and helped us plan the next steps towards involving the larger school community.

We met with the director and an assistant director from the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service (CPCS) to help prepare for the upcoming interaction with community members. With a wise and ominous overtone, they first advised that we should have reasonable expectations and be prepared for defeat. They spoke to the challenges of change and consensus in communities, and the technical obstacles around which such projects must maneuver. The Community Design Center of the School of Architecture, with which they had advised many projects, had previously discovered these lessons.
We continued defiantly, on the same course as we were before but now more aware of the challenges we were to confront. Two presentations at Henninger High were scheduled, first a brief plug at an upcoming faculty meeting, and second a longer design presentation open to the public. After the faculty meeting was postponed a week due to snow, we likewise postponed the public review. We advertised for the public review at the rescheduled faculty meeting, but school was cancelled yet again due to snow on our date, then a week-long vacation followed. The following Friday we hosted the presentation, three weeks after the date we had originally established with the principal. Much to our chagrin, we were uncovering the reality of circumstance: that all does not go as planned, and one must be able to rethink and improvise as events unfold.

The brief plug at the faculty meeting was well received. As suggested to us by CPCS, we included Henninger High students in the presentation. Michael and I spoke while the others distributed flyers. The intention was to reflect and demonstrate that the students had central roles in the project, and that they were working towards and taking ownership of the outcome. We, the privileged attendees of Syracuse University, aimed to work with these students, not to provide for them, to empower, not support.
The project

Last Fall, SU design students teamed with Henninger High students to begin envisioning a design project that would positively add to the high school's environment. Through discussion they arrived at the wide hallway next to the cafeteria, an overflow space for students. Now they are exploring the possibilities for furniture-like objects in this space.

Your input

This Friday, February 9, from 2:15 to 2:45 in the Henninger Cafeteria the Design Outfit will present their ideas and look for feedback. Be a part of the process! They need you to help realize the great potential of this project.

If you would like to offer ideas but are unable to make this presentation, email or talk to one of the following:

Molly E - Henninger Senior
midnightvalentine@yahoo.com

Robert Besy - Henninger Guidance
robesy3@octe.us

Douglas Jack - SU Senior in Architecture
dejack@sy.edu

Roberta Gillen - SU CPCS & Literacy Corps
rggillen@sy.edu

Design Outfit @ Henninger

Design Outfit 46

Designed by Ashley/Doug

PROJECT: phase II
That day we also showed and discussed our design developments with the Henninger High student contingent. Drawings done by Ashley and me were compiled into a packet, and substantial blank space left for the students to critique or innovate in.
With the snow-day cancellation of our public design review, we needed a replacement for the flyers we had distributed to announce it. I had previously taken a series of close-up photos in the cafeteria hall and surrounding spaces, and had the idea of recasting these objects and scenes in a new form, then representing them. Familiar objects and scenes would be seen anew, if not seen—truly seen—for the first time. The series of 18 photos was posted along the cafeteria corridor wall, where we intended to ultimately install our design, and the date and time of our public design review listed on each.
design outfit : 51

PROJECT : phase II
The public design review drew less people than we anticipated. Following the faculty presentation we had optimism, which the snow cancellation dampened but the photo installation revived. Five students and one faculty member ultimately attended, in addition to our Syracuse University and Henninger High contingents. Two of the guest students were highly responsive, and stayed well past the allotted time to discuss ideas in greater detail. While the presentation lacked the intended breadth of input, it achieved depth.

Attendees were shown an array of options organized by use, then asked to compare and contrast the benefits and drawbacks of each. The intention was to get away from each design as a complete package, and instead to isolate particular aspects and explore the range of possibilities in each. At this point we were pursuing a few possible functions: seating, trash/recycling and posting/displaying. They were all activities that already took place in this cafeteria corridor, but we aimed to recast them in new forms and arrangements.
Students were particularly enthusiastic about the mirror proposals. They were a remnant of an earlier strategy in which school elements were transposed from their typical contexts into the corridor, raising questions of otherwise straightforward objects. Chalkboards are part of the teacher’s domain in a classroom, but whose would they be in the common space of the corridor? Desks are receptacles for sitting and note taking in a classroom, but how would they be used in a place without prescribed activities? Mirrors in bathrooms are a part of the private ritual of self-inspection, but what activities would they invite in the public realm of the corridor? For students at our meeting, the mirror prospect was "hott," a slang term which approximately translates to "stylishly exciting."

The transition from sketchbook to workshop began with a trip to Lowe’s. We went not with a list of things to buy, but rather a general sense of direction and inquisitive mentality. We found some products we saw potential in—plastic sheets intended as fluorescent light covers, and fluorescent lights themselves—then had an extensive conversation with an employee. Initially we inquired about dry-erase boards, but before long were showing him sketches and discussing how we would realize other aspects of our designs. He was experienced and willing to share his knowledge, so we embraced the opportunity.
design outfit : 55

PROJECT : phase II
Through a series of small scale models we began to develop the design’s tectonics, or the composition of its construction. In all schemes a planar structural frame supported a surface, but the relationship between the two transitioned. The surface moved from infill to cover, from being subordinate to the frame to being supported by it, which enabled it to angle according to use and effect.
design outfit : 58

PROJECT : phase II
design outfit : 59

PROJECT : phase II
With these technical developments we rethought how the piece would exist in the site of the corridor. The wall liner—a thick layer along the wall—was achieving the intended functions, but lacked a compelling presence in site. We began to explore the piece as a corridor wrapper rather than a wall liner. The space of the corridor became as important as the piece itself, forming a condition of symbiosis that melded the piece to the site.
design outfit : 61

PROJECT : phase II
Two recent projects by New York City based architects 'Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis' reinforced our affinity for the wrapper strategy. For the interiors of two small, slot-site places for eating, they designed a surface that forms benches on either side then wraps across the ceiling. The surface at the upper wall and ceiling is technically achieving little to no purpose—perhaps concealing mechanical services is all—but creates a single element whose presence is transformative. The whole is difficult to categorize, existing somewhere between art and architecture, and balancing regard for aesthetics and pragmatics.
images downloaded from: http://www.ltlwork.net/
A compositional challenge with our wrapper designs became when to use which material, and how to transition between them. The formal strategy was vertical strips that bend independently, but it seemed the strips should change material across their length in relation to the user. With too many material changes across the length, the strip loses its continuity, thus its identity as a strip.

The strategy progressed into an interplay of two surfaces to address these compositional challenges. The first surface is vertical and at a consistent depth from the wall, the same depth as the lockers installed at one end of the corridor. This surface forms a wall within the wall, comparable to the hung ceiling that also exists in the hall, and is of Homasote, an inexpensive fiberboard conducive to being tacked into. The second surface intrudes into and protrudes from the vertical surface to form places that support activity. It is of a transparent plastic or polycarbonate material, and is either mirror-backed or altered by heat processes depending on the location. This dual surface system could extend directly into the hung ceiling, with the hung framework replacing the structural plywood frames.
PROJECT: phase II
Part way through the series of models, just before the wrapper scheme emerged, we began to more fully address production challenges. A former cabinetry maker in the School of Art and Design, Steven Ginsburg, critiqued the technical aspects of our designs, and conveyed to us what the production process would entail. With his feedback we successively revised schemes and returned, eventually arriving at a product that minimized use of material and time for production.
The working relationship between us and Steven took time to develop. Our first encounter with him was reminiscent of the encounter with the principal. Without our prompting he asked if we were architects, and when I confirmed and asked why he had suspected this, he listed our telling traits: the way we spoke, the work we were doing, the black glasses. My sense was that the question was motivated by part curiosity and part aversion, and made us reconsider the way we approached others. The project had begun with the aim to embrace collaboration, and while we had taken a first step by working with a wood worker, we were not interfacing as effectively as we could. Over the next few weeks I spent hours in the wood shop with Steven, speaking less and listening more.
In pursuit of plastics and wood we traveled to Syracuse’s north side, where much of the city's industry is located today. This context felt further from our University campus community than the few miles it was geographically, and personnel at these industries typically seemed bewildered by us at first. In one instance the disjunction between us and the context became the grounds for a loading dock operator to befriend us. As we approached in my bumper-sticker laden van, he chuckled at the sight and beckoned a fellow worker to take a look. As we waited for our products, he noticed us admiring a piece of plastic and offered us scraps, which the sales-person had previously stated were unavailable.
At this point we brought the design to the lead architect of the Syracuse City School District. It was a meeting we had intended to have for quite some time—essentially, an offshoot of the principal's suggestion early in the semester that we meet with a Fire Marshal—but I had struggled to get through and arrange a meeting. The delay had not concerned me much; there were so many fronts to be concerned with simultaneously, and I expected this one would be more of a formality than a source of new considerations.

The meeting proceeded with few big surprises. There were some codes our piece would have to meet regarding ADA accessibility and the combustibility of materials, but we were optimistic about being able to surmount those challenges. But the architect later contacted me with difficult news: the SCSD was under contract for a particular builder's union to perform all facilities alterations and maintenance. Our proposal would be a part of the school facilities, and as such breached the contract.
My initial attempts to find loopholes were futile. "The project can not happen," the architect stated. I was flustered, to say the least. We had an innovative design that was near entirely resolved, ready to be produced and installed free of charge. We had endeavored for months to arrive at this juncture, and collaborated with many along the way to ensure its appropriateness. "The builders union puts out fires," the architect claimed, "and we don't have the budget for anything more." A strapped school district, an ailing facility, a marginalized youth population, and confronted with a regulation inhibiting the beginnings of positive change, there was a regulation around which no exceptions could be made.
I withheld all reactionary responses and had my colleagues do the same. We would discuss the situation with a range of people, then proceed with care.

A few people suggested that we distance the piece from the facility itself by calling it a piece of art, thus placing it clearly outside the domain of a builders union. The piece was designed to be removable, which supported the re-framing as a temporary installation. Ironically, this re-framed presentation was the antithesis of our previous presentations. We had been simplifying the piece to conventional, utilitarian classifications such as a bench and trash/recycling receptacles to quickly depict it and convey the need for it. The approach had helped in other contexts, but needed to be reversed for this context.
With this approach, the bureaucratic challenge became surmountable. The inhibiting front became production, which was progressing far slower than anticipated. Most of us were working in these materials for the first time, and learning and experimenting with the processes consumed much of our time. The shop work was productive and promising, but not yielding results as quickly as we had hoped.

As the close of the semester and the project nears, the chances of a full-scale realization and installation happening are minimal. A culminating gathering will be held in the Henninger High corridor, with a single, full-scale module in its intended site and small-scale drawings and models depicting the proposal in full. Inexpensive, lightweight versions of the wrappers will attempt to capture the presence of the installation without the function.

The five Henninger High students with whom we worked closely are scheduled to visit the Syracuse University campus, as well as the ComArt facilities where the full-scale production is taking place, and the School of Architecture’s Warehouse downtown.
CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the start of the second semester we said that our primary goal was to get something built, and that we would prefer an imperfect built product to a perfect paper product. To some extent we lost that mindset during the semester. As we delved into design, we produced iterations seeking an effective, but elusive, product. Part of the improvements from one iteration to the next were to streamline the ultimate production time, so the time spent may have been compensated for as such. But the other part of the development was idealistic, wanting to create something great, and delaying the production until we had reached that point. We are left with a compelling project on paper, and only the beginnings of a full scale realization of that project.

Then did this project start and end with a romantic program? If it did not achieve its projected end product, was the program unproductive?

Our ultimate impact on the larger school community was disappointing, but did not negate the path and progress all involved had made to get that far. With the larger school community we formed a relationship more than we had an impact, got to know more than we got to help, but initiated a collective step towards the realization of the sort of impact we had thought we could make. With trial comes error, but only through trial can we achieve progress. Progress, not perfection.
SOURCES CITED


