Engaging Holistic Health through Active Design in Public Space

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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 Architecture

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Abstract

The design proposal for a health center and urban network of active pathways in Pittsburgh, PA is the cumulative result of two semesters of research and a partnership between myself and Emily Sholder (non-honors; B. Arch. May 2014). The ideas behind the research and design work included within originated from the pressing need to address physical health issues, educational shortcomings, and community disparagement present in many cities in the United States today. By addressing these issues at the scale of the individual, the school, and the urban environment through design in public space, we feel that architecture can empower people, schools, and cities to begin to solve such problems. We have explored the role of architecture in public spaces of both the United States and other countries and found a strong correlation between how spaces are used and the physical and emotional results of such spaces. In the case of our collective design, we explore how design can influence the ways that people move through, learn about, and interact with their surrounding communities. The work presented within is intended to be a representation of my personal contribution to the project and as a testament to the benefits of collaborative design work in architectural education. Some work within may not have been directly of fully produced by myself; however, all research presented is a result of mutual agreement and all design production is a result of mutual effort between Emily and myself.
Executive Summary

Contention

“We envision engaging the individual and the community in a cycle of learning and holistic health through an urban network of active community exploration that revitalizes public spaces to create a new identity of public health.”

The Child

Children’s health, though generally understood as highly important for growth and development, appears to be declining over the recent years. Today’s new technologies, changing social values, economic issues, and many other factors of a changing global society all influence childhood health in ways that neither children nor professionals can fully understand. Many of these influences are yielding negative consequences on children’s health, but despite obvious implications such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and morbidity, any overall progress towards a healthier youth population is sluggish. Health also plays a crucial role in childhood education. Without energy, self-motivation, and physical freedom, children would find learning significantly more difficult, while the reverse scenario proves this cycle unsustainable. (Jacobson, Diana. A Primary Care School Age Healthy Choices Intervention Program. May 2009.)

Mind, Body, Spirit

Health and well-being may be described through three categories, each of which is necessary individually but only applicable when in concert with the others. Development of the Mind includes everything from taught knowledge to
creative play; anything that stimulates the ability to learn, the retention of knowledge, and the capability of abstract thought. Development of the Body constitutes activity and athletics as well as nutrition and the promotion of musculoskeletal coordination or strength. Development of the Spirit comprises self confidence, self-empowerment, and a child’s overall energy and excitement. The goal of total health is to develop strength of each and the balance between the three to generate a well-balanced and strong lifestyle.

Access Zones

Not every child has the ability to access spaces in which to develop these key components of health. Factors such as socio-economic restrictions, political boundaries, and geographic features can either expand or constrict children’s access zones. These theoretical zones stretch into the realm of the community and are typically centered about the child’s home. However, given the age group in focus, the school must also be considered. Schools also have their own access zones, and through a connection to school, children gain the potential to explore previously inaccessible spaces.

The School

Elementary school aged children spend nearly half of every school day within the realm of a school or educational institution. Under the guidance of teacher-facilitators, the child learner not only expands his or her knowledge but also makes valuable lifestyle decisions and establishes enduring habits. Other than some exceptional educational models, the typical educational environment preferences development of the Mind and often neglects the importance of Body
and Spirit. Therefore, community-based spaces for the development of total health must be accessible from the educational institution.

The Community

The community is a realm of overlap between the home, the school, and the child. Furthermore, the community’s broad spectrum of people, ages, races, ideas, influences, and spaces highlights it as an important negotiator between influences of school and home. This realm contains the access zones, and its physical and influential growth over time dictates how children and all people interact with their place of habitation.

The Investigation

Given an existing urban condition, we site our investigation at the overlap between school and community. By extending the spatial boundaries of an existing educational center into new and existing healthy community spaces, we can enlarge the school-based access zone and enable children to develop stronger and more balanced lifestyle health.

As this investigation follows the Syracuse University School of Architecture curriculum, the project will be set in two semester-long stages which overlap with respect to breadth and depth. During the first stage of Thesis preparation, research into and proper documentation of conceptual ideas addressed above will be compiled into the thesis book. Specifics such as project site, analysis, program, activities, and some conceptual design work will also be determined for the thesis book and will guide the project toward the final thesis design work.