Chapter Nine
Mutual Learning in a Community-University Partnership: What Design-Build Projects Contribute to Placemaking and Placemakers

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The Neighborhood Design/Build Studio (NDBS) at the University of Washington (UW) involves architecture, urban planning, and construction management students in designing and building small community projects for nonprofit groups in the city of Seattle. As NDBS director, my goal is to nudge students toward a different type of career in which social justice concerns figure prominently in their creative problem solving. I want them to have confidence as skilled designers and makers, but I also want them to have a sense that they can make a real difference in the lives of people who traditionally have not been able to afford design services. Working in groups to design a project for a low-income client and then building that project with their own hands helps students break away from the theory-driven virtual architecture of academia and harness their energy toward realizing a socially conscious design-build enterprise.

Over the years, my students have created several design-build projects in the Danny Woo International District Community Garden in the heart of Seattle’s downtown. The garden provides low-income, elderly residents of the pan-Asian International District (ID)—many of whom live in tiny apartments or single-room-occupancy hotels—with a cherished opportunity to work the land. Established in 1975 by a local nonprofit organization, the Interim Community Development Association (ICDA), the 1.5-acre site offers 101 garden plots, more than 40 fruit trees, and a variety of open space amenities.

With an average age of 65—including a half dozen in their 80s—75 percent of the gardeners earn less than 30 percent of Seattle’s median income.
Most are immigrants from Asian countries (Korea, China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Japan, Laos), where farming was their way of life. The garden helps them continue familiar traditional activities by growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs from their homelands. It also provides them with entrepreneurial opportunities, a purposeful and enjoyable physical activity, and a social network that links them with the community at large. For the ID community, this green space—the largest in the neighborhood—not only affords a source of healthy food; it is a site where special festivities such as the summer pig roast and the fall cider press take place—a showcase of the community’s caring, cohesiveness, and strength.2

In 1989 Leslie Morishita, a UW architecture student and ICDA volunteer, recruited me to teach a design-build studio at the Danny Woo garden. The first of many such studios, this ongoing community-university partnership has helped my students leave a lasting mark on the garden. For example:

- During the summers of 1989, 1990, and 1991, they designed and built infrastructure for the garden (tool shed, entry gateway, kiosks, seating, vegetable washing and drying areas, pig roast pit, barbeque areas).
- During spring quarter 1996, they improved accessibility by designing and building pathways, stairs, seating, railings, and accessible raised garden beds, all of which are sensitive to the needs of the elderly and embrace the unique character of the site.
- In 2003 they focused on creating a welcoming street presence, increasing visibility and safety with terraces, paths, stairs, retaining walls, and lighting.
- In 2007 they continued reinforcing the public nature of the garden by installing a gathering space adjacent to the gateway.

The experience of designing and building something useful for Danny Woo gardeners has given my students an opportunity to expand their potential as civically engaged practitioners. By working to meet the unique needs of their client, they have not only been able to acquire the knowledge and skills of their chosen profession; they have also been exposed to neighborhood concerns and experienced the pride that comes from contributing something valuable to a community in need. The NDBS projects have helped make the garden more beautiful, safer, and more accessible; and they have made the elderly gardeners feel more secure in their hold on a piece of land that is increasingly being squeezed by the pressures of downtown development. Hopefully these projects have also expanded the social vision of my students.