MISSION AS PEDAGOGICAL ROADMAP
ONE ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM’S USE OF “MISSION” TO HELP DIRECT
AND FOCUS LEARNING

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Abstract
The mission of any architectural program needs to be well defined and articulated for several reasons. If the program is in the process of attaining accreditation from NAAB or another international agency, the mission can serve as a guide to the accreditation body as to the value system of the program and where resources and efforts are focused. The mission can also help integrate the architecture program into the goals of the larger institution. Additionally, the mission can serve as a roadmap for pedagogy within the program—at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The mission can help direct and focus studio projects, the development of elective course offerings, the structure of foreign studies programs, and suggest ways of teaching architecture that are aligned with the program’s values.

Keywords
Mission, pedagogy, accreditation, resources, identity, focus.

Introduction
One of the most overlooked, or perhaps under-appreciated elements of the architectural program accreditation process is the definition of a program’s mission. This is particularly important for young architecture programs—those that have achieved permission to be considered for accreditation through the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB), which is now in the process of expanding its program of accreditation to architecture programs outside of North America. Young firms seeking to establish accreditation certainly need to meet all of the student performance criteria and other elements of NAAB’s conditions for accreditation, but the importance of defining an identity cannot be stressed enough. Identity can be articulated through mission, which can reverberate through all aspects of the program. This paper is written in the belief that young architecture programs need to take the articulation of mission seriously if they are to achieve accreditation—but that shouldn’t be the only motivation for scoping out a program’s identity. Such articulation helps to focus a program, to help decide how resources (often
meager or strained in small programs) are spent, what new full-time and adjunct faculty are hired, and lecture series are planned, and what course content will be.

History of a Mission

I write about this subject from personal experience. In 2007 I became Chair of the Department of Architecture at the University of Hartford, which was in the last leg of a multi-year attempt to gain accreditation of its two-year Master of Architecture program. A NAAB accreditation visit to the program in November 2005 had resulted in denial of accreditation, and the program was heading toward the end of its six-year window in which to achieve accreditation. Disruptions in the program’s leadership hadn’t helped forge its identity. Attempts to forge a mission statement special to Hartford had not resulted in anything tangible.

Within days of becoming Chair I visited NAAB headquarters in D.C. to try to determine how the program needed to sharpen its efforts for the next accreditation visit (a focused NAAB visit was scheduled in three months). I met with Sharon Matthews, then NAAB executive director. The gist of our afternoon meeting was that Hartford needed to clearly, forcefully, and believably define the mission of its architecture program. Additionally, the mission should be “nested” within that of the larger institution, that it be an extension of the college or university’s mission, ensuring that the mission would not be counter to the larger goals of in institution. Matthews stressed that in defining the program and its focus, all of our other program efforts would be given a direction that made sense, and it would provide a roadmap for all our current and future endeavors.

A few weeks after my meeting with NAAB the Department of Architecture defined and adopted a mission that was part of the larger mission of the University of Hartford, which sees itself as a “private university with the public purpose,” an institution with a larger mission to serve the greater Hartford community. The university’s seal carries the motto: Ad Humanitatem, “For humanity.” The Architecture Department’s commitment to the professional education of architects grew from the initiative of several architects in the Greater Hartford region, with the support of the American Institute of Architects (AIA)/Connecticut chapter, who in the mid-1990s met with the University’s president to encourage the institution of a professional architectural degree program that would help serve the architectural community—both locally and in the New England region—and offer a choice in architectural education in Connecticut. The AIA/Connecticut chapter had championed the Department of Architecture over the years, as had practitioners throughout the Greater Hartford region. Building Community, Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang’s landmark report on architectural education of 1996, underscored the need for greater connections between the architectural academia and the world beyond the campus.1 The mission unanimously adopted by the department in January 2007, describes it as “…a diverse community of practitioners, teachers, and students dedicated to educating future architectural professionals and growing the knowledge base of the profession. Our commitment is to engage architecture in its civic, social, and professional realms for the ultimate benefit of the built environment and
those who use it.”

Since adopting this department mission, it has helped the program define certain curriculum content, studio projects, opportunities for off-campus studios, and a new travel program. The rest of this paper is devoted to a series of case studies taken from different parts of the program that show how the mission has served as a roadmap for curriculum content and program direction.

Connecting with the City

One of the strongest themes in the department’s mission is forging a strong connection to the state capital of Hartford and the Capitol Region. One simple way that this has been accomplished is by locating studio projects on local sites and engaging local stakeholders. In addition, the program makes a point to publicize the results of design projects to a regional and state audience through articles appearing in the Hartford Courant (Connecticut’s premier newspaper). Faculty have written about studio projects and their resulting designs and the paper’s columnists have served on review juries, taking the opportunity to assess student solutions in the context of Hartford’s urban needs. In one instance, a project to redesign the northern edge of Hartford’s central business district was described in a newspaper article written by graduate studio professor Daniel Davis. Within a day of the article’s appearance, Davis received a call from the Hartford Mayor’s Office, asking if the students could make a design presentation to the mayor. (Figure 1) The following week Davis and his students met with the mayor and the head of the city planning office, and walked them through the various schemes for redeveloping the neighborhood. Subsequently, one of the graduate students was offered and accepted a position at the planning office.

The connections between the city and the university have provided a focus for a graduate course on urban design, taught by adjunct professor Robert Orr, a nationally recognized New Urbanist architect and planner. Orr approaches the class as a review of the problems with exurban sprawl, urban decay, and the disappearance of open land in rural land—all problems that are national in nature, yet abundant in a state as small as Connecticut. The course focuses on codes, standards, regulations, and functionality as ways to remold our built environment so that it promotes neighborhoods, repairs the urban fabric, and halts unchecked development. The students become familiar with the concepts of
Smart Growth, and understood the use of the SmartCode, which helps guide planners and architects in appropriate development and the design details of six “transects” that range from rural to highly urbanized.

Orr’s class has looked at the impact of New Urbanism as an alternative to the way we have typically developed neighborhoods around reliance on the automobile, cheap gas, and making what was previously unavailable available. In the U.S., these post-war changes led to standards and codes that we literally drove by the fossil-fuel consuming private transportation, developing communities around cars, which has not resulted in living environments that are best for building community. By going back and studying development before the dominance of cars, Orr helped the students to understand that much of what shaped earlier communities was actually convenience at a different scale—goods, services, and institutions in close reach that many could walk or bicycle to, making cars not only unnecessary, but also unattractive in comparison to a close-knit community.

In his course, Orr stresses that New Urbanism is not a nostalgia movement. In fact, the emphasis on “walkable communities” served by public transportation and regional transit systems is one of the more viable, forward-thinking alternatives to development and sprawl that is rapidly consuming natural resources, fossil fuels, water, and open space. In many ways, New Urbanism is one of the most sustainable approaches to environmentally responsible development and growth. It is really about sustainability. The added benefits are more humanly scaled, livable communities with a sense of place and less congestion.

Orr’s critique of unchecked sprawl has been coupled with an understanding of the tools that New Urbanism uses to bring community development into balance. The class has visited several New Urbanist developments close by, such as Lowell, Massachusetts, as an example of how a small, industrial mill city has been reborn as a livable community. As Orr describes it, Lowell was so poor that urban renewal passed it by in the 1960s, “which essentially saved the place.” Lowell even kept its cobblestone streets. The city has hired a progressive planner and has revamped zoning for Smart Growth. Mills have been reborn as mixed-use developments. Lowell is a case study of how an old city woke up and repositioned itself to attract Smart Growth investment, and Gen-Xers are now flocking to live there.

Orr and his class also visited Broadway in New Haven, right next to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, which has blossomed as an urban center catering to the university community with a vibrant mix of bookstores, cafes, and shops. Orr and his students studied how more colleges are developing urban areas adjacent to their campuses as a way not only to attract students, but also to help shape city neighborhoods that benefit the local government by adding to the tax rolls with commercial and residential development. Orr notes that this pattern of “town gown” development has been happening all across the country, and many prospective students are now making college choices based on the quality of the urban life around them.

The field trips prepared the students to design a New Urbanism community, right in their back yard. Westbrook Village is a run-down public
housing development just east of the University of Hartford campus on Albany Avenue. The site is ripe for new development, and Orr assigned his students to create a “university village” that would blend into the adjoining densities and provide a link to the Hartford campus and encourage interaction with the university community. Designs were based on an analysis by the students of the six transects of the SmartCode, which helps guide the appropriate level of development. The development schemes (Figure 2) had to provide mixed-income neighborhoods with mixed uses, a lyceum, a small school, a train station connecting to a rail line, a church, and urban farming areas. “It was a bit of a mixture of everything,” Orr explains, and the challenge was fitting it on a 50-acre site while attracting students, faculty, and others to a development that would be occupied mostly by people without a university connection.

Orr’s appraisal of the students’ projects is that they managed to consider many factors in a short time (the entire design and presentation took place in about three weeks). Hartford Courant columnist Tom Condon was invited to the final review (Condon had previously written on several occasions on prospect of the University possibly become a partner in redeveloping Westbrook Village). In a later column, Condon wrote about the opportunities evident in the student design proposals.

**Immersed, with Practitioners, in the City**

The program at Hartford has a somewhat unique relationship with the state’s practitioners, in that the program was started at the behest of architects, who approached the university in the late 1990s about starting a graduate program (there had been an undergraduate program at Hartford in architecture since 1994). The ties between the department and the profession remain close. The department hosts professional meetings, continuing education functions, and conferences geared for practitioners, in a close collaboration with the AIA/Connecticut chapter.

One manifestation of this close relationship with the profession is the structure of Master’s Thesis studio in the last semester of the grad program. The studio meets three days a week. One of those days every week is devoted to critiques by the four principals of DuBose Associates, a firm that has operated in Hartford for over 50 years. The four principals visit the studio and circulate among the thesis students, giving crits from a decidedly practice-oriented base. On other days consultants from other areas of the architecture/engineering/construction profession come in.
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and give thesis crits. While many schools take efforts to limit their students’ exposure to input from the “real world” of practice, this program has looked for ways to maximize it—because it is part of the department’s overall mission.

Professional ties, which are a part of the department’s mission, have most recently been manifest in a collaborative program with a local Hartford architecture firm. During the fall of 2008, the department proposed to the firm JCJ Architecture that the architecture program establish a graduate urban studio at JCJ’s downtown Hartford office. JCJ Architecture shares a mission similar to that of the architecture department, as we understand the firm. JCJ is a model for other architecture firms in its commitment to outreach, to engage and improve the urban context and the lives of the people who use it. The firm has in the past shown vigorous support for Hartford’s architecture program by endowing its public lecture series and our annual student design exhibition.

The downtown urban design studio would allow University of Hartford graduate students to benefit from JCJ professionals in mentoring and first-hand experience with architectural practice. Studio projects might engage local institutions, neighborhood groups, civic organizations, or government agencies to probe needs and possible responses. Outreach through design would be the product of an educational collaboration between JCJ and the architecture program. Within a matter of weeks of our proposing the idea to the firm, JCJ President Peter Stevens and Chief Architectural Officer James LaPosta, AIA, LEED AP, announced the establishment of the JCJ Graduate Urban Studio.

This new studio commenced in the 2009 spring semester, headed by Hartford Assistant Professor Dariel Cobb. The students occupied a private studio space within the firm, and had access to the firm’s architectural staff for occasional crits and reviews. (Figure 3) JCJ had shown amazing generosity in allowing our students to make use of the firm’s office studios and other physical resources. According to Cobb, the downtown location, just behind the Wadsworth Atheneum (one of the oldest art museums in the country), has offered an unparalleled opportunity to explore Hartford, meet with the city’s planning and development officials, and pursue projects that have a special Hartford focus. Cobb and her students spent time understanding the city’s fabric, its strengths, and its weaknesses by conducting walking tours.

“You perceive interesting juxtapositions of buildings and spaces,” says Cobb, who notes a different appreciation of the city in seeing it on foot, as opposed to just driving through it. “There are big gaps in the fabric, but also interesting historic structures next to modern buildings. We are trying to understand how the patterns fit together, and the continuity between new and old.”

Or discontinuity. One weakness of downtown Hartford thrown into stark relief on the walking tours is how certain urban design decisions have countermanded pedestrian life and the vitality it can give to the city. Cobb notes that the location of on- and off-ramps has thwarted a sense of a pedestrian-safe zone. Elevated precincts such as Constitution Plaza, designed in the 1960s above the city’s street grid, further remove pedestrians from the streets. The almost fanatical provision of unhindered access to
parking garages and surface lots also disrupts the easy flow of pedestrians, who must cautiously pass parking entrances and exits. Pedestrian tunnels and elevated walks result in what Cobb calls an “antiseptic” encounter with downtown, making Hartford “untouchable.”

The best reason to study Hartford up close is that in many ways it is a textbook example of what not to do to a city. The shortcomings in transportation, infrastructure, retail, civic space, and downtown life are repeated in hundreds of small- to mid-sized cities across the U.S. Lessons learned by our graduate students here can be applied to ailing cities anywhere.

Cobb’s approach to the studio is to make it comprehensive. “The city is simply a locus, a stage upon which the entire range of human experiences, emotions, and events take place,” she explains. “Almost any issue in almost any discipline can be explored in an urban context.” Because most of her students have not lived in a city, Cobb sees the JCJ Graduate Urban Design Studio as an opportunity to introduce them to it. “More often than not, architects

Figure 3: The graduate architecture program’s downtown studio is housed in the office of JCJ Architecture, at the heart of the city, just east of the Wadsworth Atheneum and north of city hall. (Source: Author).
love the city. The intensity of its built fabric is intoxicating, the density and diversity of its cultural life is magnetic, and the layers of history written on its streets informs our understanding of the human-made world. Furthermore,” says Cobb, “the city represents certain civic values that look kindly upon architecture: tolerance, respect for the past, interest in the future, social altruism, and the appreciation of the arts and free expression.”

The first design project was a homeless shelter—more an exercise in nomadic city dwelling than simply a bed and a warm place to sleep. Along with providing shelter, the design had to be portable so that its homeless occupant could move it as he or she roved through the cityscape.

Students also worked on a project to “daylight” the Park River, which lies buried beneath Hartford. A research component required study of other river daylighting schemes, such as the one in Providence, Rhode Island, where Cobb and her students conducted a field trip. (Figure 4) Precedent analysis, explains Cobb, has uncovered the fact that different cities pursue river daylighting for different reasons. In Providence, the motivation was civic revitalization; in Berkeley, California, river conservation was the key; a project in Seoul, Korea, highlighted civic engagement and access. A key insight is that daylighting projects are championed by different groups for different reasons, and much of it has to do with who has the power to make such projects happen. So power, influence, and political leverage become factors in the design, notes Cobb.

At the end of the semester, the students documented their work in the JCJ Studio in a hardbound book that presented all of the projects.

Learning Beyond the Studio

The ultimate goal of education is to make students thirsty for knowledge, to engender within them a life-long journey of learning.

In 2007, Hartford-based architect Tai Soo Kim, FAIA, founded a traveling fellowship the supports the travel of a Hartford Master’s degree graduate each year to further their independent study.

Figure 4: University of Hartford graduate students do on-site research on a river daylighting project in Providence, Rhode Island, whose lessons they applied to a river daylighting studio project in downtown Hartford. (Source: Author).
of architecture. Students can travel anywhere they wish, but their program of independent study must include a service component (study of history, design, construction, techniques, or methods that result in service to the community or to the profession). After completing their fellowship, graduates are required to make a public presentation on campus to present the results of their travel and work.

Hartford architecture graduate Casey Nixon, selected for the first traveling fellowship, elected to extend her Master’s thesis work. Nixon’s thesis examined the use of modular design and construction at the Silver Lake Conference Center in Sharon, Connecticut. Nixon designed an activity center and a retreat lodge incorporating sustainable design and construction. The project’s clusters of buildings cascading down the hillside site would be constructed with a modular system that Nixon designed. This would allow people without sophisticated building skills to construct the project in and around the heavily wooded site.

The project raised Nixon’s curiosity about “kit-of-parts” modular construction and the impact it could have on the quality of the lives of people in need of shelter. “When I finished my thesis, I wasn’t finished,” Nixon explains. She proposed to use the traveling fellowship to continue her education in hands-on construction, to further explore the design of modular components.

Nixon chose to vary her travel experiences. First she spent some time at the Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Vermont, getting valuable experience in hands-on construction and sustainability. She also studied the creation of outdoor spaces, which was an important aspect of her thesis project.

Nixon’s next stop was Mexico. Here she worked with a non-profit group based in Connecticut to help house people in Mexico who were on the edge of homelessness. Nixon offered her design services to come up with a scheme for modest homes that would be built of modular materials that could easily be found locally. (Figure 5) Concrete masonry units and corrugated metal roofing were used because of they are easily available and their purchase helped support the local economy. She worked with a group

Figure 5: Master of Architecture graduate Casey Nixon’s alternative designs for a series of houses for the poor in Mexico, based on research she completed for a thesis project. (Source: Author).
of untrained volunteers (a group of high school students from Wisconsin, actually) who provided the brawn for construction. (Figure 6).

The social context shaped Nixon’s design. Parents find it hard to work without safe shelter for their kids. “Without basic housing, parents are forced to leave their kids at an orphanage,” explains Nixon. “By providing shelter, this project allows the kids to continue living with their families.” Nixon adapted her thesis designs for an affordable house where kids could sleep while their parents went to work. “We came up with a one-room home with six different options,” explains Nixon, who worked on the design with a Mexican architect, “with openings for natural ventilation.” The 240-square-foot structures would fit on an affordable parcel of land. Approximately $3,000 covered the cost of a single house, which could be built in about a week after its concrete foundation is poured and cured. The houses offer thermal mass to keep
heat in during cold nights and to repel it during hot days. So far, about 12 houses have been constructed, with a goal of building 35 houses.

The third leg of Nixon’s travel fellowship took her to Scandinavia to study the architecture and design of a culture that has taken modular construction to heart. For her thesis, Nixon conducted research on the precedents of prefabrication. In Scandinavia about 90 percent of construction is accomplished with prefab or modular components. “We tend to think of prefab in this country as trailer homes,” says Nixon, which gives it a bad name. “In Scandinavia it is pre-customization. The options are endless with these components systems. It is very comprehensive. They whole culture has a belief system of helping people at the bottom,” Nixon says, and the choice of modular design is a way of making that economically possible. Nixon immersed herself in this architectural culture in an attempt to learn the lessons of intelligent design and construction.

Nixon’s experience, and the travels of subsequent grad students, seems to have reverberated through other parts of the program. Last year, 17 undergraduate and graduate students raised their own travel funds to travel to Panama through the Global Architecture Brigades to work with a rural farming community on a facility (a surf shack) that would help bring money into the town. Over the course of one week the students designed the project with the community, and they hope to return soon to help the community to construct the shack. (Figures 7 and 8).

**Conclusion**

The experiences at the University of Hartford program are special to the program given the department’s history, its evolution, and its focus within the context of the larger institution.
The mission of the department has been an important element to explain to outsiders, such as accreditation officials, what the program is all about. It sets the context for why Hartford does what it does. But the mission can be an energizing force to help direct the program. It gives one a roadmap for curriculum development, for course content, for the lecture series, the hiring of faculty, and the attraction of students. More than anything else, mission can provide a roadmap for architectural pedagogy.

References


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