



Civic Studio

merges service learning, locally relevant art

— by Mary Isca Pirkola

Civic Studio is a creative project of Grand Valley's Department of Art and Design that developed with support from the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership. But ask those involved in the project to define it and you are bound to get not only a variety of answers, but also a hefty dose of resistance. It's not that they are trying to hide anything, but rather, they don't want explanations of past projects to limit future possibilities.

Paul Wittenbraker, associate professor of art and design, started Civic Studio in 1999. His idea crystallized during a General Education meeting from a discussion of how the arts could serve students across academic disciplines while providing opportunities for community service learning.

"Its development was informed by my long-time interest in two areas: experiential education and community-based art," said

Wittenbraker. "Being an artist is a form of citizenship with a duty to create not just decoration and beauty, but also leadership and contribution of ideas addressing public life."

Every third semester, Wittenbraker offers Civic Studio as a course open to 12-15 students primarily from Art and Design, but also including those from other majors.

Civic Studio course objectives are to establish a temporary project site in the community and to make art that is locally relevant, while also engaging in community service. The specifics of how the objectives are met change with each project.

"One of the issues we read about and discuss early on in the project is 'What is community and how is it represented?'" Wittenbraker said. "An artist can intend to do good things, but end up revictimizing someone they intend to empower.

Critical reflection is essential to studio work, along with a gentle respectfulness in engaging people."

One of Wittenbraker's goals in selecting a studio site is to find an interesting area that is rich with civic questions that are embedded in the physical place. In these "places of flux," he said, students make discoveries of their own that are relevant to bigger issues of civic life. Sometimes they will end up addressing issues that he didn't foresee, as happened with the Alabama Street Civic Studio. It was in an industrial, commercial and residential area between Bridge Street and U.S.-131, near Grand Valley's Pew Grand Rapids Campus.

"One aspect of that studio was the Swing Thing project where we reimagined an industrial building as a public space and reused the interior space as a kind of park, creating an exciting and welcoming environment. We fashioned huge swings from

used truck straps, providing the public with a fun, physical activity," Wittenbraker said.

During historical research for the project, students investigated displacements caused by the construction of expressways and studied the area to determine what had previously been there. They found that the studio building was once a chocolate cooler factory where equipment and furniture was made for ice cream parlors. They researched the history of the company and its founders and displayed results at the studio.

"While we were doing the Swing Thing event, members of the company's founding family came in," said Wittenbraker. "A woman in their family had just died and they found out we had created this display. So after the funeral they came in and took a tour. The studio participants connected with this family from all over the country. In many ways, art is powerful when it mediates social



interactions. These moments of reimagining spaces can reactivate those interactions.”

A huge part of each project is very intense questioning of what they are doing and why, and how can visual art initiate understanding about culture and human experience. A Civic Studio on Bridge Street delved into the concept of modern versus vernacular, questioning if the value of a place is in its future or in its history? Is it better to rebuild or preserve?

“It brought the realization that public life is negotiated in material forms, often reduced to practical issues,” said Wittenbraker. “When a whole neighborhood of homes is wiped out to put in a parking lot, that is not only a functional thing but a material change that impacts the culture, environment and mindset of the area.”

Each studio group has the opportunity to study theories of civic life through the texts and practices of visiting artists like Mitch Cope from

Detroit and Dan Paeterman from Chicago. A Civic Studio set up in the Grand Rapids Central Station drew from ideas inspired from a visit by German artist Liz Bachuuber, whose work regards nature’s place in urban society. That project was also an intense exploration of mobility — from fantasy transportation ideas, to the ways movement structures how people interact with each other.

“While each project aims to engage the community and do serious work, we also like to shake things up with a sense of humor,” said Wittenbraker, recalling another studio in a vacant building on Plainfield Avenue, in the Creston neighborhood.

“The building was an amazing historic, mothballed place. In the basement, among all kinds of weird stuff, were several crates of old Towne Club pop. We did some research and learned that Towne Club was actually marketed as a kind of club,”

said Wittenbraker. “Our initial discussions were about the difference between public space and private space and recognizing the Creston neighborhood as one of the early borders between the city and the country. An idea that really struck us was the question, ‘How do people organize themselves in groups in public and in private?’ Essentially, public organization is town or government, or that framework, and the private one is club.”

The Creston neighborhood includes the Kent Country Club on the top of a hill, and a municipal water filtration plant, near the river at the bottom of the hill. A field trip to the plant, housed in an architecturally interesting building, led to a discussion of an era in the past, when governments believed in the value of investing in the beauty of a structure as a celebration of public utility.

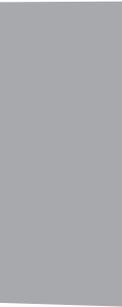
“There’s this notion that all we need to do is closely

photo at left courtesy of Civic Studio

The studio’s most recent project, *Wealthy End to End*, focused on the street’s varying history, progress and sense of community. Learn more about their results at civicstudio.org.

photo at right by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

Paul Wittenbraker, left, listens to students discuss a Civic Studio project. The course is offered every third semester.



“...art and design have a great role in civic life...”

— Paul Wittenbraker

observe the physicality of public life, and if we crack that open, out of it pours all this cultural meaning,” Wittenbraker said.

The studio was located between the public water plant and the private country club. It was set up in an old lapidary shop, where boxes of rocks remained on the basement shelves.

“One day when we were working in the studio, an older man came in asking if this was still a rock shop. He had these rocks he’d been planning on getting polished forever,” Wittenbraker said. “We were intensely engaged in our next project, but some studio members sat down and talked with him. We ended up helping him hook up with some rock people. We organized a day when he could come in and arranged for an expert to bring in his whole polishing setup. We shot a video of it to include in the exhibit as civic engagement and the concept of how clubs often form around hobbies and interests.”

The rock shop studio used a variety of methods to

reinforce distinctions between “towne” and “club.” At the entrance to the exhibit, visitors filled out membership cards and then chose to use either a towne or club rubber stamp. An exhibition of text prints combined in various ways different aspects of both towne and club to ask conceptual questions about public and private space. Visitors could make a version and print it on a small letterpress.

“Towne Club used to sponsor a hydroplane for the competitive races, so we also had little boat races between towne and club,” said Wittenbraker. “We fashioned a model of the water filtration structure, with a plunger apparatus that shot water into two runs, again using a recreational event to help demonstrate a concept.”

Last semester Civic Studio students worked on a project that focused on the full length of Wealthy Street, from the former Butterworth Dump near John Ball Zoo, to Reeds Lake in East Grand Rapids. Each studio member researched one of 15 sections to discover its history and current status, and theorized possibilities of what could be. They reported their findings online on Viqet.org, a

wiki developed in March 2007 by Wittenbraker and others as a collaborative project of Civic Studio and the community Web site G-RAD.org.

“I really think that art and design have a great role in civic life,” Wittenbraker said. “We understand it in advertising, that an image and a brand can affect our imagination and make us want to purchase things, so why aren’t artists operating as leaders in imagining how we want our public lives to be? That is the role that art has played in many cultures throughout time. Why not now?”

Wittenbraker’s efforts as a tireless advocate for creating connections between the academic community and the larger community were recognized with an award from Michigan Campus Compact. MCC is a coalition of college and university presidents, with 41 members and a goal of building civic engagement into campus and academic life.

“Through these projects, the students learn

about the communities they are living and working in. It changes their view of public service, public space, art audiences and the possibilities for community,” said Wittenbraker.

While the Civic Studio class won’t be offered again until fall 2009, Grand Valley has recently approved a series of new visual studies courses to debut this fall. Designed to be open to students from outside art and design, the courses include studios in time, space and image, as well as interactive art and curatorial practice. For more information, visit visualstudies.art.gvsu.edu.

photos courtesy of Civic Studio

Some of Civic Studio’s many past projects included Alabama Street’s Swing Thing event and an investigation of displacement of residents caused by expressway construction. The Creston neighborhood Civic Studio addressed the notions of public and private space and distinctions of towne and club membership.