

Crossing the Threshold: A Design Charette for Design Students

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Abstract

Design Week is an interdisciplinary endeavor between landscape architecture and interior design, serving as a learning experience for students on many levels outside of their traditional day-to-day education. At its core, it teaches the importance of collaboration and teamwork in a fast-paced charette environment. Through team building and the sharing of ideas, students are able to produce a cohesive result amongst complete strangers. Relationships are formed and design ideas are heightened. This paper explains what a charette is and how it has changed over the years, the importance of charettes for interdisciplinary learning, and how a one-week design charette at a university functioned, and the outcomes of that charette.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of interdisciplinary learning in the academic environment. Design Week took place at a midwest university and was a first-of-its-kind event in the College of Architecture and Planning. This week-long experiment included landscape architecture and interior design students, two fields that would typically not mix in the academic world. These two disciplines came together to work on a project for a nationally recognized zoo and their goal was to connect interior and exterior spaces. This week-long endeavor involved over 200 students and forced them to work together and think about design in ways they never had before. This charette was a successful experiment and will be continued at the College of Architecture and Planning.

Literature Review

Charette is an old French word that means cart, it refers to the École des Beaux-Arts, or School of Fine Arts, and the daunting task of students quickly and frantically finishing their drawings as they were taken away on a cart (Willis, 2023). In Willis' article about questioning if Charette was too old school, he discusses how the term charette has changed over time. He mentions that, as an educator himself he wants to eradicate the typical "all-nighter" that students are too used to because it creates poor mental health and an unhealthy work environment. Willis discusses how charette is used today successfully, he describes a current-day charette in the professional world as a collaboration between the client, stakeholder, and anyone involved in the design of the project. The process of the charette can last one to three days and allows for everyone to be able to go home at the end of a long day to see their family and practice proper hygiene.

Charettes now are viewed as a brainstorming activity between all parties involved and are much gentler than the old French charette. Willis goes on to state that collaborative charettes are supported by the U.S Green Building Council and the National Charette Institute.

According to the National Charette Institute (2023), there are five primary benefits of using a charette model to generate ideas for a project. These benefits include trust between participants and officials through meaningful involvement, a shared vision amongst groups, increased feasibility of a project based on support from citizens and professionals, good planning through diverse input and public involvement, and a benefit to the economy of design by avoiding costly rework and optimizing productive time periods. These combine to create the primary draw for design charettes and guide the structure of the event to create a fast-paced and productive environment that benefits both participants and the project at hand.

Charette has become an integral part of the design world due to its many beneficial effects on quick and effective design thinking. Charettes are defined as a, “two or more day intensive design workshop in which a mixed group of participants work collaboratively towards designing future visions for a certain area” (Roggema, 2014). These workshops typically bring participants with a variety of different backgrounds and expertise together and form a common goal between them. The goal is to solve a problem within a fast-paced environment that challenges the by-the-book thinking of design individuals. Charettes focus on opening new portion of the mind, the portion that takes leaps of faith and relies on creative wit in order to tell an impactful story through design.

The function of a charette is to create an environment in which a design is able to come together as a cohesive effort between multiple parties. The main purpose of a charette is to showcase to designers, “how conditions that are at times not addressed comprehensively nor holistically can be combined through doing applied research by design; where design is understood as a process of discovery and creation that results in synthesis” (Neuman et al., 2021). The many disciplines of design tend to become entirely independent of one another, with little interaction among designers creating a final product that is not comprehensive throughout all aspects. That issue establishes the necessity of charette, which brings together groups that do not commonly work with one another and creates an environment in which collaboration is imperative to creating a functional design. Charette creates a process of mutual learning and improvement upon skills, as well as the development of new skills through social interaction. By sharing experiences and ideas, a common design language is created which sparks motivation amongst a group to work together towards a common goal.

Body

Two design disciplines that do not often mix in the educational field are Landscape Architecture and Interior Design. There is a common divide between these two disciplines, and that divide is created by the separation of interior and exterior spaces through architecture. Landscape

Architects work on the locations around the exterior of a building, while Interior Designers work exclusively on the inside of the building, allowing the exterior building shell to create a separation between each of these disciplines. But after looking deeper into both professions, it is easy to see the way in which they interact through the medium of thresholds.

As defined by the American Society of Landscape Architects, Landscape Architecture is the “planning, design, management, and nurturing of the built and natural environments” (2023). This culminates in a field that plans and designs a plethora of sectors within the outdoor world, such as parks, campuses, streetscapes, and residences. Damian Holmes states in an article for *World Landscape Architect* that a professional in the field of Landscape Architecture “creates and enables life between the buildings” (Holmes, 2022). The function of Landscape Architecture bears likeness to plants growing through the cracks of concrete, not only through the creation of green spaces within the urban fabric of cities but also due to its ability to promote both environmental and social progress.

According to the International Interior Design Association(2023) interior design is “the professional and comprehensive practice of creating an interior environment that addresses, protects, and responds to human need(s)”.

On the same basis as Landscape Architects, the profession of Interior Design often comes with a preconceived notion that a designer decorates homes or simply chooses finishes within a building. Interior Design is much more than material selection, and nearly every aspect of the interior built world has an interior designer at the helm. Interior designers are in charge of space planning facilities to optimize their function through a solid understanding of circulation and experience. Interior Design is beginning to move forward in a direction that closes the divide between itself and the other design disciplines, allowing them to provide a holistic impact within the built environment.

A national Zoo announced “The Campaign of Our Zoo, Our Community, Our World,” a collection of projects revolving around reinventing the guest experience within the zoo grounds. It focused primarily on three locations: a reimagination of the zoo entrance fit with a welcome center, a Global Center for Species Survival, and a brand-new exhibit, the International Chimpanzee Exhibit. These new locations combine to create an updated circulation of the Zoo that integrates the White River Botanical Gardens but also brings with it chimpanzees. The International Chimpanzee Complex is an exhibit with a layout, unlike any other exhibit within the Zoo’s grounds. The primary emphasis of the exhibit is to advance chimpanzee care as well as to allow chimpanzees and people to make a personal connection with one another. The exhibit incorporates two primary locations throughout the zoo and spreads across the zoo’s full footprint, connected by a string of overhead travel tunnels that offer visitors a firsthand viewing experience of the primates traversing from place to place.

However, with the reimagination of the Zoo and the creation of several new key checkpoints across Zoo grounds, it became a topic of conversation that the reimagination could extend further into the Zoo's footprints, encompassing other exhibits and guest experiences and blending the concept of the zoo into something more transitional rather than zoned. This was brought to the attention of the faculty of a midwest University, in which professors began working together to create a multi-disciplinary workshop with the purpose of generating as many ideas for the Zoo as possible in a short time span.

The faculty of both Interior Design and Landscape Architecture became involved in the proposal of an interdisciplinary charrette involving both programs that sought to showcase new opportunities for the Zoo upon the completion of the "Our Zoo, Our Community, Our World" initiative. It encompassed students from both programs and provided an environment in which different design disciplines interacted with one another. Thus, the spring semester for Interior Design and Landscape Architecture students at the midwest University began with a 5-day interdisciplinary charrette to reimagine a key transitioning point within the Zoo. This large-scale project had interdisciplinary teams with a variety of different backgrounds and levels of expertise, and students were encouraged to interact with other disciplines to learn about other facets of the design profession (CAP, 2023, June 16).

The creation of teams for the charrette was no easy task, with over 200 students total to be accounted for in the process, Design Week involved all students who had completed their freshman year in both the interior design and landscape architecture programs. The charrette was organized through the creation of 5 separate teams of approximately 40 students with each of these 5 teams divided once again into 4 smaller groups of 10 students. Each group was picked carefully in order to maximize the variety of design experience to strike a balance between Landscape Architecture and Interior Design students and allowed underclassmen to learn from their older peers. The groups were also provided with one upperclassman student leader and a faculty mentor to facilitate the charrette process. Team leads were selected during the prior semester and were provided the brief of the project early to prepare themselves to act as a mentor for their team throughout the project.

Design Week was the first of its kind at this university and its focus was on a transition into a new conceptual framework for the Zoo, "thresholds" became the driving concept of the charrette, in a sense of combining two design fields as well as bringing them together to provide future insight for the potential of the Indianapolis Zoo. In a literal sense, the charrette brings together Interior Design and Landscape Architecture, two disciplines within the design field that focus on completely different portions of design and challenge them to work together to create a product that blurs the lines between them.

The charrette began on January 9th, 2023 with a kick-off meeting in the College of Architecture and Planning building on the University's campus. The kick-off meeting provided students with a brief explanation of the project at hand. Each group of 40 students were split into 4 teams of 10

and encouraged to work together to create a cohesive project amongst their respective 4 groups. Each team has a lead, who was an experienced peer towards the end of their respective program, and a faculty advisor a professor of one of the respective programs there to help the team lead find their footing and provide the materials that the team requested. The scope of work for each group began with a common anchor point for each team, the Zoo's Café on the Commons. The scope expanded from the café in each of the four cardinal directions. Each of these directions within the individual scope for each small team encompassed an exhibit for potential redesign, as well as a portion of the zoo's grounds for students to explore the concept of thresholds and reimagine the zoo on a conceptual basis. Utilizing thresholds, students were encouraged to combine their efforts to create a transitional reimagination of the zoo's circulation and future space planning that still fits with the aesthetic and spirit of the Zoo.

THE FIRST DAY there seemed as if there was a perceived disconnect between the interior design students and the landscape architecture students. This disconnect derived primarily from the lack of knowledge that either program had on the other, which made it difficult for students to comprehend what a final vision for the charrette would look like. This perceived roadblock eventually turned into a prime opportunity for students to gain a better understanding of the other discipline participating in the charrette. Teams gathered around and sparked conversation by explaining the structure of their chosen program, expressing their own perspective on the design process, and explaining what deliverables are required for their chosen program. This conversation allowed team leaders to make a final decision on what deliverables they wanted for the end of the charrette and gave these leaders a further understanding of each student's skill set.

THE SECOND DAY of the charrette began with students gathering and showing their work from the previous evening. Students brought to their stations a general idea of what portion of the project inspired them the most, and inspirational images and sketches were shown to the group. After ideas were shared, groups got together and began creating a more cohesive list of goals and objectives for the project, and a general set of zones was created. This allowed everyone to understand the driving lenses for their portions of the project, allowing them to work independently while keeping their portion of the project cohesive with the work of the group. A finalized set of deliverables was created, and responsibilities began to be delegated. The students then got to work on further conceptualizing their portions of the project.

ON THE THIRD DAY of the charrette, students began the process of developing their final deliverables for the charrette. Students brought with them conceptualized plans and sketches for their delegated portions, as well as the materials needed to finalize their products. The group leads and faculty advisors met with students and provided feedback for the work they had produced and provided them with one final set of tasks to complete for the day. After the initial critiques, such as proposals and quality of work the third day was primarily utilized for rapid production of final products, with students refining their plans into digital renderings and creating detailed sketches for signage, paving, and other design details. Pin-up boards began to

fill with progress drawings from throughout the charrette process, telling the story of how the groups of students worked toward achieving their final zoo reimagination. The final pin-up on the last day of the charrette was a true showcase of the passion and creativity radiating from every design student and created a spectacle out of the final review of each project.



CAP. (2023, June 16). Students start the semester with an intensive design challenge. College of Architecture and Planning.
<https://blogs.bsu.edu/cap/2023/06/16/designweek/#:~:text=DesignWeek%202023%20kicked%20off%20the,themselves%20in%20the%20creative%20process.>

As a way to memorialize the process of design week, students were encouraged to participate in a coding exercise involving post-it notes. This exercise was established to allow students to provide their feedback on design week, reminiscing on lessons they learned throughout the process and sharing their input on the importance of charrette in design education. Students were asked thought-provoking questions to summarize their perspective of Design Week, with these questions revolving around their favorite part of Design Week, the most important thing they learned, and their perspective on the value of design charrettes. Students provided a short answer to each question on Post-it notes and attached the notes to the boards dedicated to the question. After this exercise was completed, the answer boards were observed and studied in order to compile a generalized collection of answers. Each Post-it note was read and then placed accordingly into the group that it fits into. For instance, if a student's answer expresses that their favorite portion of design week was the group they worked with, this would be generalized into a category revolving around teamwork. These generalized groups were then utilized to recognize the importance of interdisciplinary education as well as the benefits that participating in a charrette has on students.



Ange Alfaro, S., Merrill, J., & Bulmahn, J. (2023). *IDEC – Interior Design Educators Council*. IDEC.
<https://idec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/IDEC-Exchange-Spring-2023.pdf>

This process of Design Week helped students further develop their knowledge of design and the importance of design charrettes. When asked about the value of participating in a charrette, students exhibited a newfound respect for the process of design thinking. The majority of answers to this question had a direct connection to the rapid production of design ideas in a short amount of time. On this board, one student answered that the importance of design charrette is “to use quick thinking and problem solving to create a large variety of designs.” This exhibits a positive response to what could have been a stressful environment, where students embraced the short time span of Design Week and utilized it to think quickly on their feet. Another category worth noting was the combining of different ideas and skill sets to create a cohesive whole. Out of the 38 post-it notes included on this answer board, 11 students mentioned collaboration and combining ideas. One student states their main takeaway from Design Week, was “the efforts of all people in a group combined can result in brilliant ideas.” This answer coupled with the answers for rapid design thinking, showcases that students have established an appreciation for charrette in education, and understand the importance of collaboration and teamwork to create incredible work in a short amount of time.

Conclusion

This charrette reveals the overall importance and necessity of interdisciplinary education and provides an incentive to continue expanding upon the design curriculum in the future of the University’s College of Architecture and Planning. The sheer creativity and passion that was developed in each student throughout Design Week serves as an example of what is to come if different programs in the design field continue to interact with one another. Students consistently learned skills in the realm of collaboration and teamwork and began to understand the connections between different disciplines in the design field. An education that fosters interdisciplinary efforts serves as a preparation for students to enter the professional world of design, in which collaboration amongst fields is imperative to creating a cohesive and holistic design. Design efforts in the professional world rely on teamwork and understanding, and this can lead to clashes of ideas on a project, as designers lack the knowledge necessary to understand the purpose and function of other disciplines. These creative differences could be alleviated if a basis of understanding of each profession is established early on in design careers.

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