

Something Old, Something New: Re-examining a Rural High School Campus



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More recent buildings are functional, but not inspiring. The most difficult building is the old Men's Dormitory. No longer used as a dormitory, this structure was heavily damaged during a recent storm. The alumni, many of whom lived in the dormitory, want to restore the building, despite the fact that the structure is in poor condition and is not currently used.

The problem of the Men's Dorm encapsulates a larger problem facing the school: the past versus the future. The school was specifically chartered to educate young people about agriculture and home economics, and many of the alumni and school board members emphasized this history. However, our informal conversations with students revealed a disconnect between the school's history and the aspirations of today's students.

Our students returned to the Mississippi State University campus and wrote a set of project meeting notes, documenting the various viewpoints we encountered. As a class, we discussed the idea of resolving (or at least choosing between) conflicting viewpoints. Importantly, each student was left to manage this conflict on his or her own.

After completing the project notes, the students were charged with developing master plans of the campus. After some discussion, the students decided to work individually on the master planning phase, so we produced fifteen unique master plans. When they were complete, we held a mid-semester review on our campus, which was attended by the EDI director, Mr. Larry Morgan, and School of Architecture faculty members.

After the relative strengths and weaknesses of the master plans were discussed collectively, the students were charged with revising the master plans and developing "Phase I" projects (i.e. the first logical step in executing the master plan). We decided collectively that all students would include classrooms and a new cafeteria in their Phase I projects. However, students had the latitude to introduce additional work if appropriate. Regardless of the proposed scope of work, students were encouraged to focus their project on a single aspect of the Phase I project (e.g. emphasizing a new classroom building while deemphasizing the new cafeteria).

The semester concluded with a follow-up meeting with the school community. Although most students produced contemporary designs – contrary to the client's general preference for tradition design – our projects were very well received. In fact, it became clear at the end of our presentation that EDI's mission of promoting progressive, environmentally friendly K-12 schools had been achieved.

This studio was specifically designed to meet the needs of both our architecture students and a K-12 school client being served by the Educational Design Institute.

During the first three weeks of the fall semester, students worked on a generic classroom project. They were told to design a K-12 classroom – no parameters. Very quickly, the students realized that some parameters were needed to focus the project. After some discussion, the students were directed to explore various K-12 pedagogies, or methods of teaching. With pedagogies ranging from High/Scope and Montessori to current music theory, each student worked to create a space that is informed by yet enhances the proposed teaching method. These projects were reviewed on a pass-fail basis.

After returning from a field trip (not specifically related to the content of the semester), the students began work on the "main" project of the semester – a master planning project for Forrest County Agricultural High School. To start the project, we travelled 3-1/2 hours to the subject campus and met with approximately fifty people associated with the school, a group which included alumni, parents, teachers, administrators, coaches, and students. After a brief campus tour, we introduced the project, asked questions, and listened to the group's hopes and concerns. Importantly, we ate lunch with the group, allowing our students to have more intimate conversations with individuals.

The input from the school community was diverse, often conflicting, and usually passionate. This school has an unusually strong and active alumni base. The current campus, which houses grades 9-12, includes a variety of buildings. The oldest building, built in 1911 and renovated in the 1930s by Noah Overstreet, is the physical and emotional heart of the campus.