Building a Playground - - and a Community!

Assistant Professor Ekaterini (Kat) Vlahos in the Department of Architecture believes that educators have a responsibility to connect students with communities, cultures, people, and places. Here is a description of one of her successful efforts to strengthen architectural education through hands-on experience and service-learning.

There is a place not far from downtown Denver that lies in the shadow of oil storage tanks and within a stone’s throw of the South Platte River. Once a barren expanse of packed dirt, this summer it will be covered with grass and crowned with play equipment in constant use by students at nearby Fairview Elementary School. Professor Kat Vlahos, students in her graduate design studio, the faculty and children at Fairview Elementary, and a multitude of professionals and community volunteers worked this metamorphosis – just the first of many envisioned for the site.

A Community Space

From the beginning, Prof. Vlahos and her team set out to create “a safe place where kids can play outdoors and a space for the community to come together.” The Sun Valley neighborhood where the playground sits is dominated by the built environment, but is adjacent to a natural one – the South Platte – that provides a refuge from the urban scene. Upgrading the playground was an important first step in a long-term effort to connect the school, the neighborhood, and the river.

Collaborative Design

Through this project, Vlahos also sought to empower the children involved. To this end, students at Fairview Elementary became partners in the design process. After spending time together at the school and on the riverbank, graduate students and the children worked together to create a development plan. Models were built, viewed by the College of Architecture and Planning, and displayed at Fairview Elementary. In collaboration with her colleague, Professor Phil Gallegos, the graduate students have designed and will build an outdoor pavilion in the playground. In the process, the children learned that they can positively impact their environment. They also profited from a unique mentoring experience that proved equally beneficial to the graduate students.
Execution and Involvement

With plans in hand, the design team proceeded to enlist the aid and funding needed to accomplish it. The Broncos charities came forward with a $100,000 generous contribution that provided the impetus for raising the additional funds needed.

Other assistance came from the Denver Public Schools, the Denver Mayor’s Office, the Westside Outreach Center, the Trust for Public Land, Neighborhood Cultures of Denver, Councilwoman Ramona Martinez, the National Parks and Recreation, the CU Foundation, and the American Institute of Architects.

The project called for hands-on help as well. Neighbors, including children, showed up in force to design tiles with local artists that will be installed in the playground. Also, faculty at Fairview sold inscribed bricks that will be installed and will foster a sense of ownership and pride.

Down to the River

The next step in executing the master plan for the Sun Valley project will be to acquire and incorporate the land that lies between the school and the South Platte. Additional landscaping is envisioned, including community space and learning gardens to provide opportunities for outdoor education. More shade structures will be installed. More collaboration will occur; an even larger community will be created.

Service that Serves Everyone

Kat proudly acknowledges that this project has given her students an opportunity to “perform a valuable, significant, and necessary service that has a real impact on the community.” Rather than executing a theoretical project in the confines of the studio walls, her students have had the opportunity to make a difference in real lives. Just ask the kids on the playground.

http://thunder1.cudenver.edu/aandP/research/research1_a.html