# THE ROLE OF FIELDWORK: BUILDINGS-LANDSCAPES-CULTURES FIELD SCHOOL AND ARCHITECTURAL PEDAGOGY

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to share the pedagogical value of fieldwork in architectural education by exploring students' experiences in the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Field School as a case study. It also examines pedagogical methods for integrating fieldwork into the regular architectural curriculum.

The field school encourages students "to look at this world from multiple perspectives and often from the standpoint of those whose voices and stories are not accounted for in history canons." To achieve this, the Field School incorporates problem-based learning methods of scaffolding, or the breaking up of a complex project into manageable parts, and chunking strategies, in which students learn to categorize knowledge and exercise cognitive flexibility, an ability to shift modes of thought, and engage multiple concepts at once. During fieldwork, students learn to cross boundaries and to connect, apply, and shift knowledge as they encounter real-world situations. These skills equip students to become citizens of the world, learning through smallscale situations about broader social dynamics. This awareness subverts traditional architectural education that often focuses on influential icons based on authorship and aesthetics, obscuring the people who occupy and use buildings.

Developing fieldwork as a component of architectural curriculum is complex, requiring a lot of preparation to coordinate events with students, residents, and scholars. Above all, fieldwork is fundamentally about building relationships, and this work is never complete. Building on these overarching issues, we argue that fieldwork needs to be carefully integrated into the regular architectural curriculum for its pedagogical value.

## INTRODUCTION

In August of 2016, images of burning buildings in the neighborhood of Sherman Park in Milwaukee, Wisconsin circulated through international news networks as protesters reacted to the shooting of Sylville Smith by a Milwaukee Police Department officer.1 Many protesters were frustrated with police violence, media narratives, and pervasive segregation.<sup>2</sup> This moment of violence and destruction of the built environment is how most of the world will remember Sherman Park, a neighborhood deceptively labeled "resilient" despite decades of policies that reinforce racial and class segregation, while concentrating opportunity in the white suburbs.3 This global event cannot be fully understood without stories on the ground: stories of frustration leading to unrest, as well as stories of people taking back their neighborhood and turning sites of trauma into positive places.<sup>4</sup> Global images are powerful mainstream narratives, which often obscure the social context surrounding such events.5

Likewise, architectural curricula often focus on influential icons based on authorship and aesthetics, obscuring the people who occupy and use buildings.6 This engrossment with icons does not equip students to understand the ordinary buildings and landscapes that comprise the majority of our world. Furthermore, the focus on high design relies on an oversimplification of building "users," disregarding how humans influence the world around them.7 With these oversights in mind, the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Field School (henceforth Field School) starts with the study of how humans engage their surroundings. Design is a later phase, as a separate course in a subsequent semester.8 This curriculum subverts traditional architectural education. During fieldwork, students learn to cross boundaries and to connect, apply, and shift knowledge as they encounter real-world situations.<sup>9</sup> These skills equip students to become citizens of the world, learning through smallscale situations about broader social dynamics.

The goal of this article is to share the pedagogical value of fieldwork in architectural education by exploring students' experiences in the Field School as a case study. In this program, students come to understand how the burden of broad social problems ultimately impacts individual lives and is expressed through the everyday built environment. Simultaneously, they gain skills that allow them to see critically, ultimately restructuring their knowledge of the cosmopolitan. Students then bring this interconnected perspective back to their design work.

First, we describe the pedagogical background of the Field School.<sup>10</sup> Next, we provide a brief overview of this program, a five-week summer course at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's (UWM) School of Architecture and Urban Planning (SARUP). Then we examine four teachable moments in Field School students' learning experience. We also describe how fieldwork pedagogy can be integrated into studio design. Finally, we discuss potential obstacles in bringing fieldwork into the architectural curriculum.

#### THE FIELD SCHOOL PEDAGOGY

The concept of strategies and tactics by Michel de Certeau underpins the philosophy of the Field School. Architects design the physical layout of the buildings and in that, establish strategies, while inhabitants subvert and manipulate the intention of the design through their ordinary action as tactics.11 Field School students learn through on-the-ground situations that cannot be fully planned into the curriculum. Understanding users' tactics is an important lesson for design students, but difficult to incorporate in lesson plans, so there must be alternative pedagogical methods. To resolve this, director Dr. Arijit Sen, an associate professor at SARUP, looks to problembased learning pedagogy (PBL).<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the Field School incorporates PBL methods of scaffolding, or the breaking up of a complex project into manageable parts, and chunking strategies, in which students learn to categorize knowledge and exercise cognitive

flexibility, an ability to shift modes of thought and engage multiple concepts at once.<sup>13</sup> The first three weeks are scaffolded into examinations of materiality, building history, and social history. This order allows students to shift from the comfort of studying users' physical engagement of space into the complexity of how people socially engage space. The last two weeks are dedicated to chunking; students categorize their knowledge through eliciting themes in order to produce digital stories and exhibition materials. Beyond the Field School, there is a studio course offered annually that makes use of the stories and data produced by summer fieldwork.

#### THE FIELD SCHOOL PROGRAM

Since 2012, students in the Field School have conducted research in Milwaukee neighborhoods such as Sherman Park in groups of about twelve graduate and undergraduate student participants per year (Figure 1).

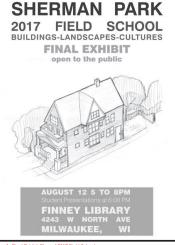


Figure 1: Final Exhibit Flyer of 2017 Field School. Courtesy: Created by Chelsea Wait, August 12, 2017, Milwaukee, WI. Participants spend the first week documenting four or five houses, beginning with producing a floorplan by measuring walls, features, and walkways [Figure 2].<sup>14</sup> This material exploration reveals social, cultural, technological, and economic changes through interior patterns of use as successive families and generations inhabit the home.<sup>15</sup> The floorplan and field notes document how residents subvert the original intentions of the architect.

Students conduct archival research in the second week; they trace the history of the house and street through census data, photographs, and Sanborn maps. These materials help to contextualize the construction, renovation, and occupancy of buildings and streets (Figure 3).

In the third week, students conduct interviews with residents of the neighborhood to learn about the social history of each home (Figure 4).<sup>16</sup> Oral history scholars guide students through interviewing procedures, technical audio recording, and debriefing afterward.



Courtesy: Photograph by Denise Zahran, June 5, 2018, Milwaukee, WI.

These interviews provide an opportunity for students to discover that their thoughts about an everyday object, space, or place may be different from others'.<sup>17</sup>

The last two weeks are reserved for developing stories, themes, and portraits of residents and homes. Daily reflection among students and scholars on ongoin research and field notes aids analysis and the exchange of thoughts, contributing to their ability to categorize knowledge. Weekly, residents collaborate in developing stories and discussing themes in a process called cotheorization.<sup>18</sup> Finally, students present their boards, podcasts, videos, and websites to residents, students' families, and SARUP faculty.

#### CROSSING BOUNDARIES

In architectural education and practice, one learns to cross physical, professional, social, and ideological boundaries. Designers shape the physical world for people and must be cultural go-betweens. Field School students learn how others experience the world

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Figure 4: Interview with Matt Bohlmann. Courtesy: Photograph by Guha Shankar, June 13, 2017, Milwaukee, WI.

situated in different bodies within different contexts. This information cannot be gathered in a one-day site visit. It must be a collaborative research process that is self-reflective and involves dialogue and relationships with residents.<sup>19</sup>

Many UWM students come from suburban areas throughout Wisconsin, where incomes are generally higher and which are primarily white. At the state level, political discourse stigmatizes poorer neighborhoods of color in Milwaukee by using racialized and classed spatial metaphors such as zip codes.20 As in other Rust Belt cities, segregation in Milwaukee parallels geographic boundaries created by more than a century of informal discrimination and formalized by restrictive covenants and redlining maps.<sup>21</sup> After these classifications were deemed unconstitutional, midcentury freeway clearance and construction devastated vibrant black communities.<sup>22</sup> Today, segregation is subconsciously reinforced by word-of-mouth advice for students to "stay safe" or "don't cross the river."23 These warnings reinforce a segregation mindset. Student Bella Biwer tries to allay her father's fear of the urban:

I took him to Sherman Park [...] I could tell he was surprised that "this neighborhood" could

have such beautiful historic homes and wellgroomed lawns. "Wow, this is pretty cool," [...] In my experience, this means of showing or experiencing rather than telling can be a successful way to non-argumentatively settle opposing points of view.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Biwer is using chunking strategy. As she categorizes knowledge about urban neighborhoods, she senses a deep divide between media stereotypes and the authentic people and places she has studied. Biwer's anecdote resists the stereotype that lumps together Sherman Park and racialized people. This is evident in common spatial metaphors such as zip codes and neighborhood names used in reference to blackness.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, she creates a place-based experience for her father that humanizes the people living in Sherman Park.

As economic polarization grows in the United States, it is increasingly clear how deeply it is linked to place and layered on the landscape, so that it becomes racialized.<sup>26</sup> First-hand experience that crosses boundaries gives students the cognitive flexibility that they will use as future architects to understand the difference between abstract "users" and the people who make and remake the world through their everyday actions.<sup>27</sup> This understanding is one of the benefits of ethnographic fieldwork for architecture students.

#### THE SEVERITY OF FORECLOSURE

Some homes that students document are empty city-owned houses, where systemic reasons such as tax foreclosure, unpaid citations, unemployment, or predatory lending caused residents to leave abruptly. The fault often lies with negligent landlords. Field School participants witness firsthand the results of segregation, poverty, and racism. These broad issues are often discussed in conceptual conversations, but their gravity cannot be truly felt by students in the classroom. Ethnographic fieldwork in these vacant homes presents students with an embodied experience to witness the severity of this crisis.

The Field School has so far documented seven foreclosed houses, with permission from the Department of City Development. In 2018, students measured such a





Figure 5: Foreclosed Home. Courtesy: Photograph by Seung-youp Lee, June 6, 2018, Milwaukee, WI.

house with green boards and a bright orange eviction notice. Students first approached it through tall weeds and a moss-covered porch with broken railings (Figure 5). Water damage, rot, and structural faiture hindered students from measuring walls. They found animal footprints, droppings, and even an occasional bird's nest, marking a long vacancy during which non-human occupants overtook the building. Each house was in a different state, forcing students to imagine the previous dwellers. Traces of renters or owners, such as utility bills, ID cards, and family pictures, became evidence in establishing a story of who they were and how they lived. In her blog, Esmé Barniskis describes her tragic understanding of the moment the family was evicted:

The other [home], far harder for me to walk through, had been left by the city mostly unchanged from when the previous owners left in what must have been a hurry. I imagine the head of the family telling the children, "Take only what you can carry."<sup>28</sup>

In this moment, Barniskis comprehends the human side of Milwaukee's foreclosure crisis and, consequently, the eviction crisis that sent families in downward spirals.<sup>27</sup> Also concerned by this phenomenon, Teonna Cooksey's research enumerates a century of history in these homes and their sudden forced evacuation (Figure 6). Whether by city or bank foreclosure, vacant houses accumulate in places like Sherman Park. Cities demolish former homes in a concentrated area, which addresses the problem of vacant homes being vandalized but pockmarks the architectural fabric of the neighborhood. Cooksey concludes that while the crisis affects individual families, it also happens on such a broad scale that it shapes how people perceive whole swaths of the city.<sup>30</sup>

#### THE POLITICS OF HOMEOWNERS AND RENTERS

Over several years of Field School interviews, consistent themes and patterns have emerged. One constant tension that students observe is between homeowners and renters. In the interviews, homeowners generally see renters as careless and disrespectful of community. They often point to improper disposal of trash, unkempt lawns, or small repairs that go unfinished as examples of why owners should keep a nervous eye on rental properties. Field School students understand the opposition between homeowners and

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Figure 6: Teonna Cooksey's Field Notes. August 15, 2018, Milwaukee, WI.

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renters as a structural problem: it is not so much that owners are good and renters are bad, but rather that it takes resources to be able to care for yourself, and only with those resources may care for their home.<sup>31</sup> Joy Huntington explains this theme from one of her interviews:

> She returned to this topic of renters and landlords multiple times, and because of her body language, tone, and repetitiveness, this is a significant subject she took personally. She stated that, "the lack of care reflects on me [the interviewee] because no one will remember my house they'll remember the unkempt one next door."

Huntington's field note underscores how a home's value is interviewen with its surrounding context. This interviewee, who does not live in the unkempt house and might never enter it, is frustrated by how it reflects on her. Huntington uses cognitive flexibility to extrapolate this situation into a larger understanding of how people structure their world according to their values.

Understanding the different values and meanings of a house is a constant pedagogical task in the Field School. Homeowners seek to protect the value of their houses in a part of the city that is far undervalued, while renters are often mobile out of necessity or instability. With the recent spike in real estate investment, rental homes and apartments are increasingly owned by absentee landlords, which raises the number of renters. Absentee landlords extract profit and abandon the local economic cycle that once kept communities thriving.<sup>32</sup> Coupled with unemployment and mass incarceration, much of the stability of neighborhoods like Sherman Park is gone.<sup>33</sup> The strength of the community lies in fewer hands, but those who remain work tirelessly to maintain it.

#### LEARNING FROM RESIDENTS

During fieldwork, students engage directly with people who are working to resist and undo injustice through their practices of caring. They meet residents working to make their neighborhoods thrive, not to prove stereotypes wrong, but to lift communities and create networks of love, safety, and security. In 2012, students met a resident named Mavis McCallum who said she and her neighbors don't talk about social justice; they talk about caring.<sup>34</sup> McCallum's statement sparked a long-term investigation of caring, a feeling and action that strengthens community relationships. Caring can be enacted in ordinary, day-to-day life: picking up trash, patronizing local businesses, or creating block watches. For others, caring is an extraordinary act.

Sherman Park resident Camille Mays sees informal memorials for traffic accidents as reminders of death in her neighborhood. She also sees these as evidence of caring, but these memorials fall apart and gather detritus. So, she replaces them with perennial flowers with permission from the family of the deceased.<sup>35</sup> Mays' work exemplifies an urban gardening best practice for students. As a result of the Field School, Mays now collaborates with architecture students in their studio courses, creating designs for vacant homes and empty lots.<sup>36</sup>

Another resident who performs extraordinary acts of caring is Christie Melby-Gibbons, a Moravian pastor. Melby-Gibbons uses healthy food to care for her community. She started Tricklebee Café in 2016, a pay-as-you-are-able restaurant that feeds everyone. whether they pay \$20 or wipe down tables for 20 minutes (Figure 7).37 Tricklebee inspires students to reflect on how places such as restaurants and gardens can influence healthy living. Student Kalin Reed writes, "Christie talked about nature and how it can be used to help heal communities and teach young people about caring for their neighborhood through gardening."38 Reed and his classmates learn from residents, which contradicts prejudicial media stereotypes.39 This ethnographic theme of caring teaches students that the architecture of our everyday world is maintained by social networks of support in a mutual relationship between people and place.

CONCLUSION: FROM THE FIELD SCHOOL TO THE STUDIO

The essential position of the Field School is "to look at this world from multiple perspectives and often from the point of view of those whose voices and histories are not accounted for in history canons."<sup>40</sup>



Courtesy: Photograph by Chelsea Wait, June 6, 2017, Milwaukee, WI.

People expect that structures will outlive them, and so numerous people share a specific building over time.<sup>41</sup> Yet, individuals bring different values and worldviews to bear on their surroundings. This is why fieldwork takes many forms: students observe a house, measure it, interview dwellers, produce podcasts, create short videos, and design presentation boards. Through these multiple narratives, they tell a more complex story, a sentiment echoed in Teonna Cooksey's comment: "I want to write the true account of what people are telling me without creating and/or perpetuating negativity."<sup>42</sup>

Students take this learning into their design work. For instance, in his essay on "Rethinking Home," Jared Schmitz maps out the spatial positions of socialization at the front of the house.<sup>43</sup> Schmitz focuses on the front porch, lawn, and upper porches, preparing himself for a studio project that creates a landscape that is conducive to neighborliness [Figure 8]. Schmitz's work is exemplary in integrating lessons from Field School into design studio projects.

Building upon the teachable moments described here, we argue that fieldwork needs to be carefully integrated into the regular architectural curriculum, but there are no simple means of doing so. There are two overarching issues to consider: the nature of fieldwork itself, and the structure of the architectural curriculum. Coordinating fieldwork for a dozen students is complex and requires a lot of preparation. It depends on clear expectations and timeframes from students, neighborhood residents, academic experts, and instructors. Furthermore, fieldwork is fundamentally about building relationships; this work is never complete.

Secondly, to fully achieve the potential of publicly engaged problem-based learning, students must complete fieldwork and apply that knowledge in their studio designs in stages. Developing fieldwork as a component of the architectural curriculum would require long-term scaffolding, or a succession of courses that begin with intensive fieldwork first and then apply knowledge from the field to design. Without

# LIVE-WORK

MIXED-USE, SHOP HOUSE OPEN FRONT TO PUBLIC WORKSPACE IN REAR PRIVATE UNIT ABOVE LIVE UPSTAIRS, WORK DOWNSTAIRS SMALL BUSINESS LOCAL EMPLOYMENT LIBRARY, RESOURCE CENTER RESTAURANT, BAKERY, CAFE ART STUDIO, DAYCARE, STORE

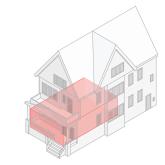






Figure 8: "Live-Work: Rethinking Home," Citizen Architects Studio, 2017. Courtesy: Schmitz, Jared. this concatenation, fieldwork and design might only be loosely related in students' cognitive skills, and the connection students make between physical space and social space would remain bifurcated. These are points to consider carefully in addition to the entanglements of departmental administration, but the advantage is that students develop the ability to categorize knowledge and the cognitive flexibility to make sense of complex problems that frame ordinary places. The field of architecture engages in broad conversations across time, space, and place, yet the work of the architect is inevitably local and contextual and must emerge from a deep understanding of a specific location. Critical analysis skills and the first-hand experiences in different neighborhoods that students gain from fieldwork equip them to see how power shapes the world and teaches them to be architects who are able to shift modes of thought and engage multiple concepts at scales from the local to the global. •

#### ENDNOTES

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7. Arijit Sen, and Lisa Silverman, ed. *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014.

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9. Arthur Efland. Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum. Teachers College Press, 2002.

10.As authors who draw on the experiences of students and neighborhood residents, we must state our position. Relative to the graduate and undergraduate students whose research and writing we draw from, we are doctoral students and at times research coordinators. We had the privilege to access academic discourse, knowledge of past Field School research, rely on personal connections with neighborhood residents, and have experience in ethnographic research. Additionally, as doctoral students, our approach to the Field School was to gain the methodological and research experience, but also as potential architectural educators, we were simultaneously observing our pers. Relative to residents of Sherman Park, we are privileged to live in weathitm residenthoods positioned closer to economic and social opportunities. One of us is a white, middle-class woman and one of us is ethnically Korean and an international student. We are privileged as students of higher education. Durratl, Field School students come from diverse backgrounds, from international students to students from the neighborhoods in which Field School does research.

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16. The Field School students interview neighborhood residents who come from a variety of backgrounds: most are homeowners, retired, and middle class. The Field School director makes a connection with residents who wish to participate in this project and then uses the snowball sampling technique in which residents connect sudents with their friends, family or other contacts in the given neighborhood for collecting interviews. The Field School is unable to interview youth under age eighteen.

17. For example, we, as Field School students, personally observed several situations in which residents used the back door exclusively, organizing furniture or storage that blocked the front door, thereby subverting the original intent of the main entrance.

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27. While many students come from areas of Wisconsin that are predominantly white, there have been several students who come from the neighborhoods in which Field School does research. These students may not come from mareas of great privilege, but they come from UWM and are seen as privileged by the residents of Sherman Park. Crossing boundaries here refers not only to the racialized geographic zones of Milwakee but also social classes such as education.

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33. Kaiser, "Reggie Jackson on Milwaukee's Racial Segregation."

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39. This narrative of caring also becomes a dialogue through the arts. In 2016, theater students at the UWM Peck School of the Arts wrote a play using Field School oral histories to amplify these voices and the concept of caring. Student actors portrayed community members and the local history of Washington Park.

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