

Kansas State University Excellence in Engagement Award Submission



Small Town Studio: The Eureka Project

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Synopsis

The **Small Town Studio of the Department of Architecture** was begun in 2012 by Professor Gabbard. Its goal is to engage rural communities across Kansas with student-generated design and visualization services. The Studio's goal serves two constituencies. Small rural towns are in general relatively underserved contexts for design services; architects, designers, and planners, however, are often integral to fostering community vitalization. Architecture students, as nascent design professionals, benefit from exposure to real-world dynamics such as community and client interaction, consensus building, and project management skills. In short, many small towns are eager for an infusion of new ideas, and design students gain valuable experience in applying their design efforts in these contexts. The Small Town Studio provides these two constituencies a mutually supportive connection. A third group, design and construction professionals, will take the lead on implementation of projects the community and students have identified.

Scope

Since its inception, the Small Town Studio has provided design services to six Kansas communities, including Cuba, Pittsburg and Colby. Jamestown and Blue Rapids are under study this academic year. The Studio has partnered most prominently with the city of Eureka, where more than a dozen projects have been pursued, and the engaged partnership with this community is the focus of this submission.

Activities

The basis for the project is a year-long graduate architectural design studio. The studio challenges students to research small towns and issues they face, to identify a context in which to work, an issue or set of issues to address, and to develop a design project. The issues and projects were developed through an engaged process of workshops, events, and other forms of community input combined with extensive research, expert consultation, and input from faculty and other reviewers. Once projects are ratified by the community, students are responsible for moving the project towards realization, which may include activities such as securing permissions, permitting, grant writing or other fundraising, identifying

Eureka Project Partners

The goals of the Studio – immersion of students in a small town context, exposure of students to the realities of project definition and management, address of issues facing small towns, and the realization of both tangible and intangible outcomes for these towns – were high. A tripartite partnership was conceived to achieve these complex issues, based on the pragmatic notion of utilizing the strengths of various agents. K-State, for example, is a good resource for research, where students can apply focused study under faculty guidance; community partners act as clients, and provide a currency of knowledge and nuance that cannot be found in data; and professional partners are poised to execute plans. This model utilizes each type of organization to the best of its abilities and simultaneously maximizes benefits. It is hoped that the public-private-institution model promulgated in the Eureka Project will be replicable and can be applied to other Kansas municipalities.

Institution: Visioning at K-State

On campus, students have consulted a wide array of experts in formulating their projects, led by faculty from the **Department of Architecture**. Faculty from Landscape Architecture and Regional and Community Planning have been consultants and project reviewers. Myles Alexander of the **Center for Engagement and Community Development** has tutored students and faculty on community engagement best practices. Early assistance in setting up the Small Town Studio and identifying community partners was provided by Ron Wilson of the Huck

Boyd Institute and David Proctor of the CECD. It is anticipated that as the work of the Small Town Studio expands additional consultants and partners across campus will be identified.

Community: *Response from Eureka Partners*

The Eureka Project was championed by a number of local agents that provided encouragement, advice, leads on potential projects and sites, and funding for student travel and other activities. These agencies included non-profit groups, the City Administrator and the City Council, concerned citizens, local industry, and private concerns. The **Eureka Foundation** (<http://www.eurekakansas.com/>) was instrumental in establishing a linkage between K-State and the town, providing space, funds, and advice to forward student work. Much of the Studio's effort has gone into assessing community priorities, including fact-finding events, focus groups, workshops, and reviews of student proposals, and input from citizens and other place-based agencies is always considered.

Profession: *Executing Projects*

Fulfilling the last goal of the Small Town Studio – fostering actual change on the ground – is not something the academic world is best at. Turning student visualizations into a product that is useful to the community is better suited for established, working professionals. An important partnership was fostered in the Fall of 2013 with **Lester Limon of PKHLS Architecture** from El Dorado and Newton, Kansas. Well versed in the profession of architecture and in community consensus building, Mr. Limon provides criticism and guidance for students during the planning and design phases of their projects. Projects the community has prioritized and funded will be implemented through his firm. Another significant partner for implementation is the **Rural Design Mob**, a newly-established design and construction firm based in Eureka that has forwarded a number of projects through developing designs, writing grants, and construction activities.

<http://www.pkhls-architecture.com/>

<http://ruraldesignmob.com/>

Interaction between the three types of partners leads to robust, successful community-oriented responses. *Institution-Community* relationships ensure projects are well-grounded in Eureka and also innovative and research-based. Projects address specific needs of Eurekans, and projects seen as a priority are adopted. *Institution-Profession* dialogue allows student projects to benefit from professional expertise and provides professional oversight of vision-stage projects. The *Community-Profession* linkage provides pathways to project completion for Eureka as well as generates fees for consulting professionals. Though only a few projects have moved through to the production stage as yet, the three-pronged partnership will see more projects executed this calendar year.

Outcomes

The year and a half long Eureka Project has seen numerous positive outcomes for all partners involved.

Physical Outcomes: Improvements in Eureka

The first complete project was a new space on Main Street. The space was provided by the Eureka Foundation for the Studio to have meetings, events, and exhibitions of student work. The highly public storefront signaled the activity of the Studio in Eureka, thus addressing specific identified needs. Its interior renovation was designed by students and fabricated by **Coleman Management** of Eureka. That same firm is sponsoring a second project this year, a small art gallery, which it will construct this spring. Established in the summer of 2013, the Rural Design Mob continued work on several student projects, including the visioning and rehabilitation of Eureka Springs Park ([project website](#)), funding for bike lanes, and the design of a new gateway on Main Street. It is anticipated that more projects will be constructed in the near future, including nature trails, an overlook for the Fall River, and a wetlands learning laboratory at the local elementary school.

Intangible Outcomes: Fostering Community Optimism

Certainly, not every student project can be built, but even conceptual projects can galvanize Eureka and its citizens into considering their future. The Small Town Studio has affected policy at both the city and county level, notably including a new plan for the County Courthouse plaza on Main Street, the consideration of arts and historic districts, promoting parks and trails for recreation and pedestrian transportation, and exploring beautification and economic revitalization. One very positive indicator that Eureka is looking forward is the inception of the new **Eureka Studio**, a subsidiary of the Eureka Foundation. Eureka Studio is a local community design center that acts as a liaison and local facilitator for potential clients and design service providers such as the Small Town Studio and professionals. Only recently established, the Eureka Studio will be able to advance projects beyond the end of the academic year, develop relationships with a wide array of community-oriented disciplines, and act as a repository for design ideas and other information for the town.

Student Outcomes: Perspectives and Projects

All of the students involved in the Eureka Project have reaped academic, professional, and personal rewards from their experience in Eureka. They have connected with small town Kansas in a way that few of their generation ever will, and the service-oriented focus of the Studio perhaps shed a new light on the role of the architect as an interactive agent of community rather than on community. The Rural Design Mob, comprised of three graduates of the 2012-13 Small Town Studio, seem to have taken this message to heart, fully immersing themselves professionally in Eureka. Eureka wants to broaden its relationship with recent graduates, and is establishing summer internships that count towards professional licensure. Those that will seek internships elsewhere will benefit from being able to tell future employers about their community, client-based, and project management experience.

Exposure

The Studio has cultivated exposure of its activities through the press ([media relations story](#), also in the Manhattan Mercury), radio, and internet (<http://eurekakansasstudio.wordpress.com>). The first Small Town Studio developed branding for the city and a new website for the Eureka Foundation. In 2013, the work of the Studio was presented to the League of Kansas Municipalities, published in the Kansas Journal of Governmental Relations, and featured in a symposium at the Engagement Scholarship Consortium's Annual Meeting. Small Town Stewardship, a book anthologizing the work of the first academic year of the Small Town Studio was self-published ([small-town-stewardship-book](#)).

Looking Forward

The association between the Small Town Studio and Eureka began informally a year and a half ago. In that time, the collaboration has become more concrete, and recently more formalized relationships between the agencies have been formed. These relationships – particularly the interaction between the Small Town Studio and the Eureka Studio – will operationalize design activities, and help achieve an even greater impact on the city, developed jointly by the community of Eureka, K-State, and other dedicated partners.



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