

“The Boulevard House”: A SETTLEMENT HOUSE APPROACH TO PROJECT BASED LEARNING IN  
URBAN COMMUNITIES

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The Boulevard House is a theoretically framed project-based learning initiative in Southwest (SW) Detroit, the location of multiple projects by faculty in the three UM schools of social work (SSW), music, theater and dance (SMTD) and the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design (PSSA&D). We implement and evaluate the *Settlement House* approach to enact and measure the effects of this form of project coordination, shared learning opportunities, scholarly and professional contributions and community-university change making. The findings and outcomes can situate discussions of replication of the *Settlement House* approach to other venues in Detroit and Michigan. The shared learning experiences for students and faculty in these three professional schools can create a space and agenda to develop a more enhanced collaborative program between the SSW, PSSA&D and SMTD for pedagogy of community engagement and social change.

The *Settlement House* model is the foundation for community social work practice in the United States and provides a creative and responsive base for theory and practice. The *Settlement House* approach began in 1884 with Toynbee Hall, in the industrial East Side of London, England. Migrating to the US in 1894 (Hull House, Chicago) and 1893 (Henry Street, NYC) settlement houses still thrive in major North American cities including Chicago, New York City and Toronto. The *Settlement House* model reflects many aspects of community based participatory research and empowerment evaluation<sup>1</sup>. The *Settlement House* model also includes (1) a process of observation and discussion, and (2) a translation of study findings into intentional community engagement, action and change, both of which are recognized as “design thinking” in architecture, art and design.

Beyond the direct provision of community service and service learning experiences for students, project based learning within a *Settlement House* model returns neighborhood-specific benefits. The *Settlement House* model differs substantially from many forms of university –community engagement. The model actively incorporates five dimensions of social change needed to create lasting impact in social, political and economic spheres within which distressed neighborhoods operate: comprehensiveness, synchrony, integration, long-term perspective, and inclusiveness<sup>2</sup>. This initiative builds on a newly created settlement house in SW Detroit (the Boulevard House) by 1) adding to the new paradigms of research on *Settlement House* models as a framework for community work distressed communities, and 2) developing a theoretically based social engagement curriculum of greater depth for SSW, PSSA&D and SMTD students.

**Rationale:** Detroit is increasingly recognized among critical social policy theorists as one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Fetterman, D. M., & Wandersman, A. (2005). *Empowerment evaluation principles in practice*. Guilford Press; Minkler, M., & Wallerstein, N. (2010). *Community-based participatory research for health: From process to outcomes*. Wiley.

<sup>2</sup>Fasenfest, D. & Gant, LM (2005). A Model for a Pro-Active and Progressive University-Community Partnership. *Professional Development*; 8(2/3), pp. 24-39.

first Industrialized Western Democracy cities emerging from a post-industrial to neostructural society. In Detroit, new forms of governance are emerging through a painful abrogation of democratically elected municipal leadership. Population declines generated fewer federal and state resources supporting the traditional range of community services; Detroit's Department of Public Health and City of Detroit Human Services closed, with services eliminated or outsourced to the private sector. A few programs survive and thrive through mergers. Many more community programs dramatically reduced services, merged or are in the process of closing.

Between 2008-2011, a small collective of faculty, community residents, social work historians, and leadership staff from one of the few remaining active settlement houses in Detroit (Peoples Community Services) witnessed the rapid erosion of the funding, political, municipal, legal and physical structures in Detroit that allowed community service programs to function for nearly 100 years. The collective observed that residents in some Detroit neighborhoods continued to work hard to maintain some aspect of viable quality of life. Sometimes, residents would work with other members of the collective, e.g. university faculty engaged in community service, student interns, or community based courses (such as the current lead faculty's work with the SSW Community Based Initiative).

These observations and direct participation in neighborhood based activities led the collective to: (a) recall the importance of the Settlement House model in neighborhood work, (b) note new paradigms for community work emerging in Detroit neighborhoods, (c) recall the early documentation of neighborhood change strategies in US Settlement House papers and documents, e.g. *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, (1895/2007), (d) visualize "a settlement house for the 21<sup>st</sup> century", and (e) incorporate arts practice, education, and activities as strategies for resident engagement, education, problem solving, and participation – all of which can lead to productive social change, service learning and social engagement.

The collective secured modest support from the SSW. The Boulevard House (412 West Grand Boulevard, Detroit) was launched in summer 2011 as a community partnership. Core logistics partners included UM-SSW, People's Community Services of Metropolitan Detroit, and members from four local Southwest Detroit art, history and social advocacy groups (Museo del Norte Project, CLAVE, Fronteras Nortenas and the Mexican Patriotic Committee). Faculty from PSSA&D and SMTD joined the collective in Summer 2013. In Winter 2013, Professor Larry Gant moved the SSW Community Based Initiative courses from the UM Detroit Center to the Boulevard House. In Winter 2014, four courses (SW 697, SW 647, SW 532 & ARTDES 311:002) are actively taught in the Boulevard House. Two Latino Studies courses and one combined SW/PSSA&D course will be taught in Fall 2014 at the Boulevard House. We are in active discussions with Semester in Detroit (SiD) to relocate some student housing to the Boulevard House in Winter 2015. Since Fall 2012, increasing numbers of faculty, courses and projects have expressed interest in participating in the Boulevard House. Thus, we seek support to more fully formalize, organize and implement the structure of the Settlement House model at the Boulevard House.

**Proposal:** We propose the expanded deployment of this community engagement program following the internationally and historically reputable *Settlement House* model. This program will be realized with class based, internship, and special studies activities located at the

Boulevard House in Southwest Detroit (412 W. Grand Blvd). We propose seeking resources for the following actions:

- Employment of an SSW graduate student or doctoral student, as associate resident manager of the pilot program, and employment of an assistant (staff or graduate student) to help design and deploy community outreach and engagement strategies.
- Employment of SMTD and PSSA&D graduate or advanced undergraduate students as artists in residence at the Boulevard House, with curatorial responsibilities. Time of residence for graduate student workers would range initially from 1-2 semesters.
- Travel to Chicago, NYC and Toronto to tour and consult with *Settlement House* officials regarding program scalability, lessons learned and community education innovations.
- Research team (SMTD, PSSA&D and Social Work graduate/undergraduate students) to assess artistic, academic and social results of the *Settlement House* model.
- Capstone event to examine results with an eye to transplanting the program to Detroit venues (e.g., Carr Center, Detroit School of the Arts), applying for *Transformation* phase funding (if still available) to make this happen.
- Modest line item for equipment and use fee for Boulevard House space and National Settlement House Association membership dues.

**Significance.** Developing a pedagogy of social engagement and social change is increasingly vital to the mission of U of M's professional schools of performing arts, social work, and art & design. Teaching students ways to engage the communities in which they work - and increasingly live - is a core skill for the 21st Century performing artist, arts educator and social worker. The *Settlement House* approach should be scalable to other programs at SMTD and PSSA&D, and we hope the approach continues to be of interest to campus-wide student initiatives engaging in arts based community work. Social engagement also locates our students within the global concerns of poverty, health, education, and social justice. The art-infused *Settlement House* approach to social engagement provides a venue for analyzing the restorative effects of arts and culture for socially just neighborhood capacity development. A widely cited report published by the Urban Institute<sup>3</sup> documents the increasing involvement and consensus of community residents, academic researchers, elected leadership and professionals for active arts participation. The report further acknowledges the important contributions of arts and culture for local, community and global economic and human development. Our proposed collaborative work aligns with other US initiatives including the (1) Metropolitan Chicago Information Center's analysis of amateur arts practice in Chicago neighborhoods for community development, and (2) Urban Institute research documenting the roles of arts and cultural activity in racial and ethnic relations<sup>4</sup>. Findings gleaned from an evaluation of the *Settlement House* approach can contribute to the research improving the understanding of the kinds of arts and culture data and program models that artists, social workers, residents, social planners, and policymakers need for working with new, emerging municipal models of governance and

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson, Maria Rosario, Florence Kabwasa-Green, and Joaquin Herranz. 2006. *Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Wali, A (2006). *The Informal Arts Finding Cohesion, Capacity, and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places*. Chicago: The Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College; Jackson, Maria Rosario. 2008. "Towards Diversity that Works: Building Communities through Arts and Culture," in *Twenty-First Century Color Lines: Multiracial Change in Contemporary America*, edited by Andrew Grant-Thomas and Gary Orfield. Temple University Press.

community participation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Dwyer, CM (2008). "Communicating Value: Reframing Arts and Culture Data." Portsmouth, New Hampshire. RMC Research Corporation.