

Development

CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE

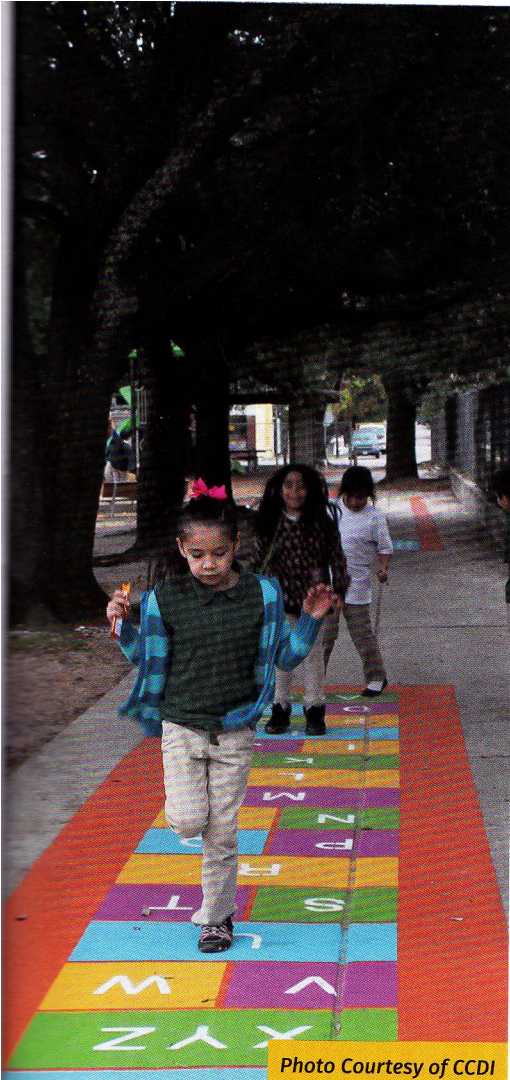


Photo Courtesy of CCDI

Architectural design initiative partners with communities to improve local lives

The Collaborative Community Design Initiative, led by architecture assistant professor Susan Rogers, has developed design plans to improve a dozen neighborhoods in the greater Houston area over three, two-year projects. In Hearts, their most recent outreach, Rogers and her students considered the effect design can have on health.

"Hearts has been about looking at the relationship between community design and health," Rogers says. "In other words, how do our communities impact our health and how can design transform and impact the community?"

The initiative partnered with four local communities: Magnolia Park, Sunnyside, Fifth Ward and Denver

Harbor. They looked at the communities' park and green space access, walkability, fresh food access, as well as the education and income statistics for the areas, since those can be health indicators.

"In the United States, overall, the relationship between income and health is correlated tightly, meaning that the lower your income typically is in the U.S., the greater the likelihood that you won't live as long or that you're not as healthy," Rogers says.

"Things like heart disease, diabetes are elevated in neighborhoods where poverty is more prevalent than other neighborhoods."

The analysis, which is completed in the first half of the project in part by students in Rogers' community design workshop class and the faculty and staff of the Community Design Resource Center, is aggregated in a briefing book that is made available to community members who can choose to act on the designs. The participating community stakeholders, students and Houston-area professionals are all invited to the Community Design Charette that Rogers hosts in the summer and is vital to brainstorming and development of their ideas.

Tiger Lyon, an architecture graduate student, worked extensively on the Hearts initiative, which wraps up this semester after two years of work.

"As a team, we spent the first half of the (first) semester doing research

and the latter half working on a book in which we incorporated diagrams, drawings, graphic information and design ideas for the neighborhood," Lyon says.

"We also proposed our ideas and solutions in a presentation at the end of the year, which was extremely beneficial and interesting because it allowed the community to see what we had been working on for a semester and provide feedback."

While their previous projects have had a degree of success in their implementation, Rogers says Hearts has been able to do more action than before due to financial support.

"This is the first time we've actually had the resources to do what we call action projects, which has been wonderful," she says.

The CCDI has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts each time, but the Department of Health and Human Services recently reached out to Rogers to express its interest in helping her to do neighborhood planning and visioning through its Community Transformation Initiative.

For Lyon, the hands-on experience he had working in Magnolia Park was incomparable to any he's had.

"Small ideas and interventions can be just as powerful and important as large scale ideas," he says.

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