

PURPOSE-BUILT NEIGHBORHOODS AS A PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK: A RESEARCH-DRIVEN LANDSCAPE DESIGN STUDIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critically reflective case study of a community-engaged undergraduate design studio that interrogated the Purpose-Built Neighborhood (PBN) model through the lens of landscape architecture. While the PBN framework—originally developed to promote urban revitalization through housing, education, wellness, and economic mobility—served as a conceptual scaffold, the studio intentionally departed from its prescriptive format. Instead, students engaged in site-specific, research-driven inquiry that incorporated additional layers of environmental, spatial, and cultural complexity. Conducted with second-year landscape architecture students, the studio emphasized participatory and experiential learning, integrating stakeholder interviews, field immersion activities (e.g., The Drift), spatial analysis, and iterative design development. Students worked in teams to develop integrated site strategies that responded to both the PBN pillars and community feedback. Within each team, individual students proposed focused small- to medium-scale interventions, allowing for diverse design responses tailored to specific spatial, ecological, or social conditions across the site. These proposals were presented to local stakeholders and representatives of the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation as part of the final review. Learning outcomes were assessed through written reflections, peer reviews, stakeholder feedback, and alignment with Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. This multi-pronged framework supported measurable cognitive progression, from understanding site dynamics to creating context-sensitive design interventions. Student reflections indicated growth in empathy, analytical thinking, and civic accountability, suggesting that participatory, research-driven methods can enrich early design education. Rather than treating the PBN model as a fixed template, the studio used it as a generative provocation, challenging students to question, adapt, and spatialize its principles through critical and creative inquiry. The findings affirm the value of embedding structured pedagogical frameworks within community-based studios to foster reflective practitioners equipped to address complex socio-spatial challenges in contemporary landscape architecture.

Keywords

Participatory Pedagogy, Community Engagement, Purpose-Built Neighborhood, Research-Driven Design, Landscape Architecture Studio

1 INTRODUCTION

Landscape architecture education has long centered on the design studio as its primary pedagogical model—one that emphasizes iterative, project-based learning to cultivate spatial, formal, and conceptual fluency. While this approach fosters creativity and individualized expression, it has been widely critiqued for privileging abstraction over engagement with real-world social, political, and ecological complexities (Anthony, 1991; Salama, 2015). These limitations are especially evident when working with historically marginalized communities, where studio outcomes may become disconnected from lived experiences and community priorities.

In response, many programs have begun to reframe the studio as a platform for participatory processes, civic engagement, and interdisciplinary exploration. This shift has given rise to alternative pedagogical models that emphasize collaborative, context-sensitive, and research-informed approaches to design (Angotti et al., 2011; Hou, 2010). Within this broader evolution, research-driven design has emerged as a particularly valuable framework, defined here as the integration of evidence-based inquiry, stakeholder knowledge, and iterative feedback loops into the design process. Rather than separating research from design, this model positions design as a structured mode of knowledge generation, grounded in observation, precedent analysis, community dialogue, and reflective critique (Brown & Corry, 2011; Nassauer & Opdam, 2008).

This studio-based case study contributes to this evolving pedagogical landscape by examining a second-year undergraduate landscape architecture studio that engaged with the Purpose Built Neighborhoods (PBN) model through a research-driven workflow. Developed in the early 2000s, the PBN model promotes holistic neighborhood revitalization through four interconnected pillars: mixed-income housing, cradle-to-career education, community wellness, and economic mobility. Although widely implemented in policy and planning contexts, this model has rarely been tested through the lens of design education, particularly within landscape architecture studios that explore physical form, spatial equity, and ecological systems.

The studio took place in North Baton Rouge, Louisiana—an area characterized by environmental injustice, systemic disinvestment, and unequal access to essential infrastructure and services. Students were invited to engage critically with the PBN framework—not merely applying its principles, but assessing its local relevance and potential shortcomings through contextual research and community dialogue.

As part of a broader research-driven methodology, students conducted site investigations, mapped urban and ecological systems, engaged with stakeholders, and iteratively refined their design proposals. Methods included experiential site readings and structured walks, such as *The Drift*—a technique adapted from Situationist practices (Debord, 1958) and later reinterpreted in landscape architecture by scholars such as Girot (1999), who framed it as a perceptual tool for uncovering spatial atmospheres and latent site conditions through embodied, intuitive exploration. Rather than functioning as a standalone exercise, the Drift was integrated into a broader toolkit of strategies designed to help students perceive subtle patterns of movement, use, and atmosphere. It complemented more conventional techniques such as mapping, precedent analysis, and stakeholder interviews, enabling students to build site narratives from both intuitive and analytical perspectives.

Ultimately, the studio aimed to investigate how structured community engagement and layered research methods could enrich student learning and produce design proposals that are both spatially compelling and socially grounded. By adapting the PBN model to a landscape architecture framework, the studio provided a platform for testing the scalability and adaptability of participatory models within a research-oriented design pedagogy.

1.1 Objectives

The primary aim of this paper is to examine how participatory and research-driven design approaches can be used to deepen student engagement and learning outcomes in landscape architecture studios. Specifically, it explores the following objectives:

- To evaluate how structured frameworks like PBN can be critically tested and adapted within a studio context.
- To document the use of research-driven and participatory methods in guiding site analysis, stakeholder engagement, and design development.

- To reflect on the pedagogical opportunities and challenges of applying institutional design models to real-world contexts.

This case study contributes to ongoing discourse in landscape architecture pedagogy by offering a grounded example of how design studios can act as testbeds for socially responsive, research-informed design. It highlights the value of embedding community engagement, empirical inquiry, and critical reflection into the core of design education, moving beyond abstract problem-solving toward a pedagogy that integrates design thinking with spatial justice and environmental responsibility.

2 CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The design studio remains the pedagogical cornerstone of landscape architecture education. Traditionally structured around iterative, project-based learning, the studio emphasizes formal composition, conceptual exploration, and design authorship. However, this model—rooted in the Beaux-Arts tradition—has been critiqued for its abstraction and limited engagement with real-world social, political, and ecological complexities (Anthony, 1991; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007). In contexts marked by systemic inequities, such as disinvested urban neighborhoods, the traditional studio model may inadvertently marginalize community voices and overlook lived experience.

In response, educators have increasingly embraced alternative studio models that emphasize participation, collaboration, and critical inquiry. Participatory design—drawing from democratic planning movements of the 1960s and 70s—has long informed landscape architecture practice and pedagogy. Figures such as Lawrence Halprin and Karl Linn championed processes that empowered communities to shape their environments, stressing the co-production of knowledge and space (Sanoff, 2000). More recent frameworks such as design charrettes, tactical urbanism, and asset-based community development have continued to evolve participatory practice in urban and landscape design (Faga, 2006; Hou, 2010; Lennertz & Lutzenhiser, 2014).

In the studio context, participatory approaches help students navigate ambiguity and conflicting values while cultivating empathy and responsiveness to diverse forms of knowledge. Scholars such as Angotti, Doble, and Horrigan (2011) advocate for studios as spaces of civic inquiry, where students learn not only from instructors and precedents but also from community stakeholders. Unlike externally managed service-learning initiatives, participatory studios emphasize reciprocal learning and co-authorship, asking students to engage with complexity rather than simplify it.

Complementing these models, research-driven design has gained traction as a framework that integrates structured inquiry into the design process. Defined by its emphasis on observation, empirical analysis, stakeholder engagement, and iterative feedback, research-driven design encourages students to substantiate their proposals through evidence and critical reflection (Nassauer & Opdam, 2008; Brown & Corry, 2011). It moves beyond intuition and aesthetics, positioning design as a mode of knowledge generation rather than mere problem-solving.

The Purpose-Built Neighborhood (PBN) model—originating in the redevelopment of Atlanta's East Lake neighborhood—offers an instructive case of institutionally driven participatory urbanism. Developed in the early 2000s and advanced through the Purpose Built Communities organization, the model centers on four interdependent pillars: mixed-income housing, cradle-to-career education, community wellness, and economic mobility (Purpose Built Communities, 2023). While it has been implemented in over 25 U.S. cities with measurable impacts (Sharkey et al., 2022), its emphasis on replication and institutional control has drawn criticism for limiting community-led innovation. Few studies examine how the PBN framework translates into design pedagogy or how its assumptions might be tested through community-engaged studio work.

This case study engages the PBN model not as a prescriptive toolkit, but as a conceptual framework to be interpreted, challenged, and adapted through design inquiry. It places the model within the lineage of participatory and research-driven design but also invites scrutiny of its applicability to the specific social, spatial, and environmental dynamics of North Baton Rouge.

One method used to foster early engagement with place in this studio was The Drift, an experiential practice adapted from the Situationist International (Debord, 1958) and later reinterpreted in landscape architecture by scholars such as Girot (1999) and Potteiger & Purinton (1998). The Drift invites students to move through a site without predetermined goals, relying on intuition, sensory perception, and embodied observation. Rather than functioning as a standalone method, it served as a catalytic gesture, allowing students to build preliminary site narratives that were later refined through mapping, archival research, and stakeholder dialogue. As part of a research-driven workflow, the Drift functioned as a qualitative technique for uncovering spatial atmospheres, use patterns, and informal networks that are often missed in conventional site inventory exercises.

To scaffold student learning and reflection throughout these processes, the studio also drew from Bloom's Revised Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Widely used in education theory, Bloom's taxonomy outlines a hierarchical model of cognitive development—originally introduced by Bloom in 1956 and later revised by Anderson and Krathwohl—ranging from Remembering and Understanding to Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating. These cognitive domains provided a structured framework for aligning learning objectives with studio activities and evaluating student progression across multiple phases of the course. Bloom's taxonomy has been adopted in architectural and design education to clarify pedagogical goals, guide curricular design, and make student learning outcomes more measurable (Salama, 2015; Salama & Wilkinson, 2007).

Ultimately, the conceptual foundation of this studio draws from a hybrid tradition: one that combines the critical ethos of participatory design with the analytical rigor of research-driven methodologies. By engaging with the PBN model through community dialogue and experiential practices, students were challenged to consider not only how frameworks shape design, but how design can interrogate and reshape frameworks. This pedagogical approach reflects a broader ambition within landscape architecture education: to equip students with the tools to navigate the intersection of spatial form, social equity, and environmental responsibility.

3 METHODS

This study employs a case study methodology to investigate the pedagogical impact of a hybrid studio model that integrates participatory, research-driven, and experiential design practices. This triangulated approach reflects best practices in design research, where empirical, contextual, and reflective strategies are synthesized to assess both process and outcome (Francis, 1999; Brown & Corry, 2011). The case centers on a second-year undergraduate-level landscape architecture studio conducted in Eden Park, a historically marginalized neighborhood in North Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Within this context, the studio served as a platform for students to engage critically with institutional frameworks—specifically the Purpose-Built Neighborhood (PBN) model—while developing context-sensitive, community-responsive design proposals.

The methods section is organized according to three defining elements of the case study structure: (1) Project Context, (2) Design Process, and (3) Evaluation. The studio is treated as a bounded system—limited by a specific time frame, geographic setting, and pedagogical format—allowing for a focused investigation of how hybrid methodologies inform student learning and design outcomes (Francis, 1999). Each phase of the studio employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods drawn from participatory and research-driven frameworks. These included field-based exploration, stakeholder engagement, environmental analysis, spatial mapping, and iterative design development. Table 1 summarizes the primary methods and tools used across each phase of the workflow.

3.1 Project Context

Eden Park is a historically marginalized neighborhood facing systemic disinvestment, limited access to services, and environmental vulnerability. The neighborhood has been identified by the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation as a priority area for investment and revitalization. Their efforts include the adoption of the PBN model—a holistic urban development framework emphasizing four interrelated pillars: mixed-income housing, cradle-to-career education, community wellness, and economic mobility (Purpose Built Communities, 2023). The studio operated in partnership with the foundation and was framed as a semester-long exploration of how landscape design could support and adapt the PBN framework to the physical,

social, and ecological conditions of Eden Park. Although Eden Park was the primary site, students were encouraged to consider surrounding neighborhoods and regional connectivity in their proposals.

Table 1. Overview of Methods and Tools by Case Study Component

Case Study Component	Methodological Approach	Tools and Techniques
Project Context	Situational framing	Background research; Lecture by foundation representative; Review of PBN model and neighborhood plans
	Institutional partnership	Foundation documents; Local development frameworks
Design Process	Research-driven design (Phase 1: Site Analysis)	The Drift (experiential method), guided site visit, GIS mapping, site inventory, stakeholder interviews, precedent analysis
	Studio development (Phase 2: Design proposals)	Group concepts, individual interventions, pin-ups, design critiques, conceptual diagrams, final design boards
Evaluation	Reflective pedagogy + stakeholder review	Final reflection essays, peer critique, verbal and written feedback from foundation reps

3.2 Hybrid Research-to-Design Process

The studio's hybrid methodology integrates the critical ethos of participatory design with the analytical rigor of research-driven inquiry and the subjectivity of experiential practices. This layered approach draws from established pedagogical frameworks in landscape architecture (Brown & Corry, 2011; Nassauer & Opdam, 2008; Angotti et al., 2011; Hou, 2010). It was structured around a two-phase workflow designed to foster critical engagement, iterative learning, and community responsiveness.

Phase 1: Research and Site Analysis: Students began with a foundational lecture by a representative from the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation to contextualize the PBN model and introduce ongoing community initiatives.

This was followed by two forms of site immersion:

- A **self-guided Drift**—an experiential method derived from the Situationist International (Debord, 1958) and adapted by Girot (1999) and Potteiger & Purinton (1998)—encouraged students to traverse the neighborhood without fixed routes, documenting spatial and sensory cues via sketches, field notes, and photography.
- A **structured site tour** led by foundation staff facilitated historical and infrastructural understanding, layering community perspectives onto the intuitive observations from the Drift.

Subsequently, students engaged in multi-scalar site analysis using both qualitative and quantitative tools:

- GIS-based mapping (land use, vegetation, infrastructure)
- Environmental analysis (hydrology, microclimate, vegetation)
- Stakeholder interviews and informal conversations
- Precedent research and policy review

These investigations were synthesized into reflective site reports and visual deliverables that informed collective themes for the design phase.

Phase 2: Design Proposal Development: Small teams of students formulated group-level revitalization concepts structured around the PBN pillars. These shared visions incorporated findings from the research phase and prioritized socio-ecological systems. Each student then developed a detailed site-specific intervention addressing one or more PBN pillars. Design development was supported by ongoing critique, peer dialogue, and stakeholder feedback sessions. Students refined their work through interim pin-ups and a final public review attended by community members and foundation staff.

Deliverables included:

- Analytical maps and diagrams
- Conceptual plans, sections, physical models, and visual renderings

- Process narratives detailing research and engagement
- Final reflection essays connecting outcomes to broader learning goals

3.3 Evaluation and Reflection

Rather than employing standardized assessments, the studio adopted a qualitative, developmental approach to evaluation grounded in pedagogical theory. Students were encouraged to treat institutional frameworks like the PBN model not as fixed solutions, but as flexible provocations for critical inquiry, testing, and adaptation within landscape architecture practice. Drawing on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), student learning was assessed across a spectrum of cognitive levels. These included the acquisition of foundational knowledge through site research (Remembering, Understanding), the application of data in site-specific interventions (Applying), and more advanced outcomes such as design synthesis and stakeholder communication (Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating).

Students submitted final reflective essays that were qualitatively analyzed to evaluate how they integrated community input, spatial data, and experiential insights into their design proposals. Additional evaluative inputs included final project documentation, peer critique sessions, and verbal/written feedback from Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation representatives. These multiple sources of evidence allowed for the triangulation of learning outcomes and a holistic assessment of pedagogical effectiveness. To articulate and assess learning objectives using Bloom's framework, each studio activity was mapped to specific cognitive levels, as illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Cognitive mapping of studio activities

Bloom's Level	Learning Activity
Remembering	Listing the four pillars of the PBN framework, recalling community needs discussed
Understanding	Explaining the rationale behind key urban interventions
Applying	Integrating research findings (e.g., maps, stakeholder input, environmental data) to inform early design strategies
Analyzing	Comparing stakeholder perspectives, synthesizing site data
Evaluating	Justifying design choices based on feasibility and social impact
Creating	Proposing original interventions based on place-specific and community-informed insights

4 RESULTS

The findings of this case study reflect the pedagogical value of integrating participatory, research-driven, and experiential practices into landscape architecture education. While no comparative or quantitative assessment was employed, the results are grounded in qualitative analysis of student reflections, project deliverables, and feedback from community partners, collected across the two-phase workflow outlined in the Methods section. These findings are presented in three categories corresponding to the structure of the case study: (1) Engagement with Project Context; (2) Research-to-Design Process; and (3) Evaluation and Learning Outcomes.

4.1 Engagement with Project Context

Initial student understanding of Eden Park was shaped through a layered site immersion strategy combining The Drift, stakeholder meetings, and structured environmental analysis. The Drift yielded unfiltered spatial and sensory observations. One student, for instance, noted the persistent sound of traffic and the absence of shaded gathering spaces, observations that later influenced his design for a linear green corridor incorporating sound buffers and tree canopies along a key pedestrian route.

Figure 1 illustrates a student's Drift documentation, combining diagrammatic mappings, sketches, annotations, and spatial impressions. It reveals the layered environmental complexity of Eden Park—from heat exposure and industrial noise along the rail corridor to buffered green spaces near the historic cemetery. Key observations included abrupt shifts in spatial character, the presence of hard physical boundaries, and a general lack of shaded and communal gathering spaces. These early impressions informed subsequent design strategies, such as incorporating sound buffers and tree canopies along pedestrian corridors.

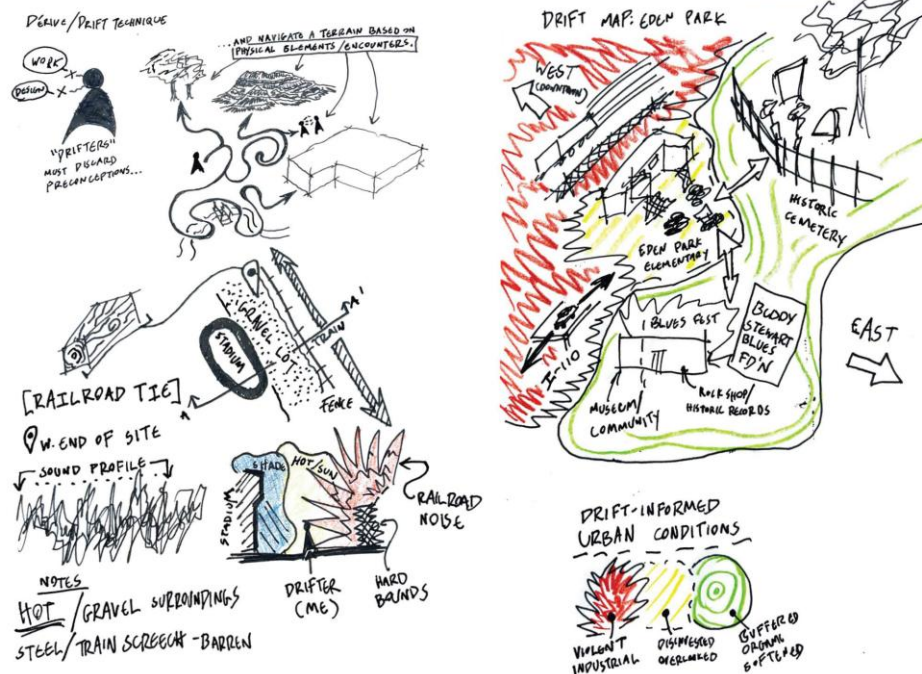


Figure 1. Student Drift mapping and observations (2024). Image by the authors (Sketch by Joseph Brooks).

Following the Drift, students met with representatives from the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation for a guided site visit and informal conversations with residents. These facilitated engagements introduced students to the historical disinvestment and infrastructural challenges in Eden Park. Importantly, students were encouraged to ask questions and listen, not pitch ideas, reinforcing the importance of stakeholder knowledge in shaping the design brief.

Reflections written after these meetings revealed a shift in student thinking. For example, one student wrote, “The drift technique extended beyond my first site visit into every aspect of my design process. Constructing my understanding of the site around my concrete experiences within its bounds helped me respond to the real wants and needs of the community in my design. The drift technique helped me to discard my preconceived notions of what the site could or should be, and encouraged me to design for what was there.” This shift from abstract design thinking to grounded responsiveness became a defining feature of the studio’s pedagogical impact.

4.2 Research-to-Design Process

The first phase of the studio emphasized exploratory and analytical engagement with Eden Park’s complex socio-spatial conditions. Rooted in the hybrid research-driven and participatory methodology outlined in the Methods section, students combined experiential observation, spatial analysis, stakeholder engagement, and reflective documentation to develop a layered understanding of place. The initial exploratory activities (see 4.1) prompted students to identify spatial patterns, environmental risks, and community resources through embodied observation.

Based on their early impressions, students were then organized into thematic groups focusing on topics such as urban ecology, health and wellness, public infrastructure, accessibility, cultural memory, and acoustic conditions. This pedagogical structure encouraged students to pursue lines of inquiry that felt meaningful based on their Drift observations and site conversations. Each group selected tools and methods appropriate to their theme and synthesized their findings into illustrated research reports, which were later shared in a cross-group workshop and reviewed by Foundation representatives. This strategy promoted collaborative learning, allowing individual investigations to inform a broader, studio-wide understanding of Eden Park.

An example of this analytical work is shown in Figure 2, a composite visualization that synthesizes multiple layers of student-led site investigation. The figure includes a Soundscape Transect diagram that overlays audio waveforms from field recordings with a landscape section and symbolic color gradients representing environmental suitability, categorized as hostile, moderate, or friendly. This analysis was informed by datasets such as transportation noise, urban heat island severity, and tree canopy coverage to evaluate human–habitat relationships across Eden Park. Additional panels highlight artifacts found during the Drift exercise, plant material collected on site, and land cover typologies, illustrating how students integrated phenomenological, ecological, and spatial data. Together, these multi-sensory mappings allowed students to uncover hidden spatial narratives, assess socio-environmental stressors, and envision design interventions that could support more hospitable, community-oriented public spaces. These outputs laid the groundwork for Phase 2 and are summarized in Table 3.

In Phase 2, students translated research insights from Phase 1 into site-specific design proposals addressing Eden Park’s spatial, social, and environmental needs. Working in teams, they developed unifying concepts rooted in the Purpose-Built Neighborhood (PBN) pillars—Cradle-to-Career Education, Mixed-Income Housing, Economic Mobility, and Community Wellness—followed by small- to medium-scale interventions. Projects responded to issues such as vacant parcels, food insecurity, extreme heat, and mobility gaps, and included park revitalizations, streetscape frameworks, wellness hubs, and civic spaces. Table 4 summarizes the nine proposals, linking design intent to research findings and PBN alignment.

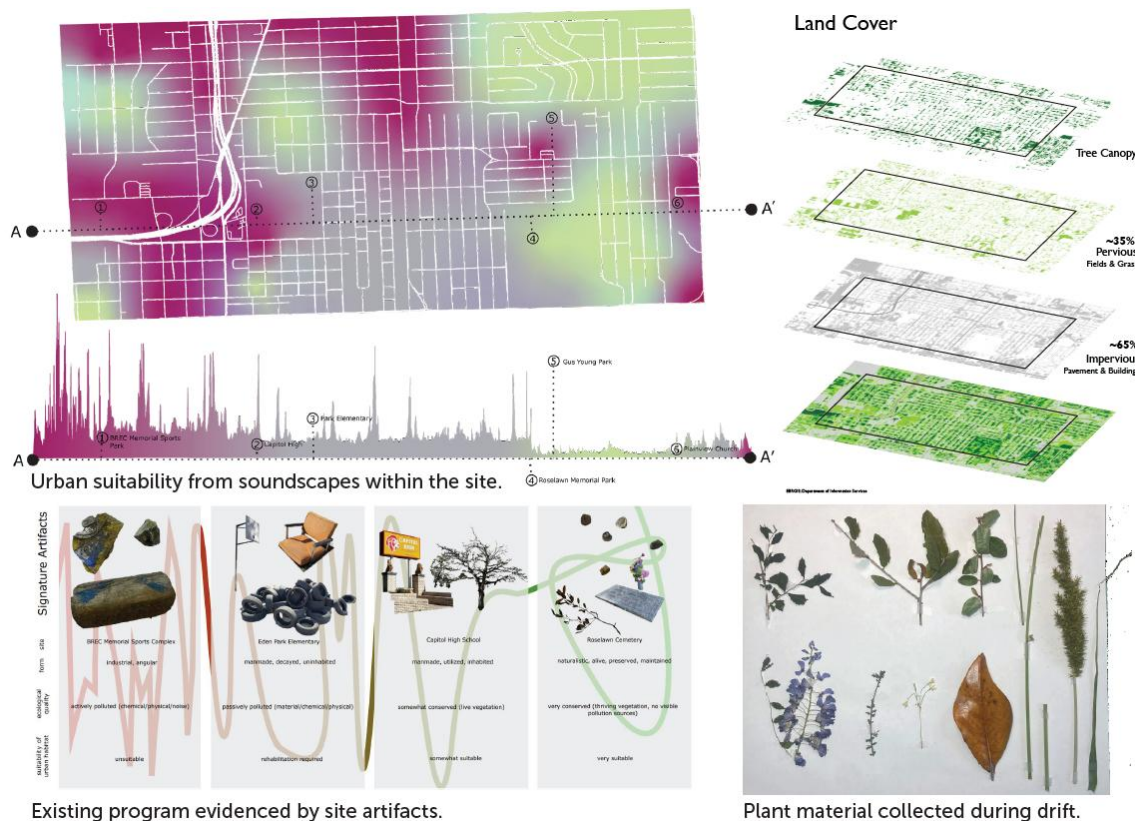


Figure 2. Multi-Sensory Mapping and Environmental Analysis of Eden Park (2024). Composite image featuring soundscape transects, human–habitat relationship gradients, land cover analysis, site artifacts, and plant material collected during Drift explorations. Images by Joseph Brooks (left panels), Clara Flynn (top right), and Kaleb Sydnor (bottom right). Used with permission (Studio Archive).

Table 3. Summary of Phase 1 research outputs

Research Category	Methods/Tools Used	Key Student Deliverables	Key Insights / Findings
Historical & Social Context	Archival research, stakeholder material, timeline reconstruction	Chronological timelines contextualizing social history and patterns of disinvestment	Identified cycles of disinvestment and moments of community organizing
Land Use & Community Access	GIS-based mapping, walkability analysis	Spatial accessibility maps highlighting proximity to schools, grocery stores, and public services	Revealed major gaps in walkable access to schools and essential services
Environmental Analysis	GIS mapping, canopy/imperious surface ratio, axonometric diagrams	Diagrams illustrating land cover types, vegetation density, and environmental stressors	Highlighted ecological stress zones and contributors to urban heat islands
Infrastructure & Transit	Sidewalk quality audits, ADA compliance, public transport route mapping	Maps and diagrams detailing sidewalk conditions, ADA barriers, and bus stop quality	Exposed non-compliant pedestrian infrastructure and multimodal conflict areas
Public Health Access	Facility mapping, zoning overlays	Visual overlays showing distribution and zoning of healthcare and school facilities	Revealed service deserts in education and healthcare access
Stakeholder Priorities	SWOT analysis, Foundation briefing reflections	Matrices organizing perceived neighborhood strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats	Surfaced resident concerns about crime, flooding, and opportunities for small businesses
Phenomenological Reading	Drift walk documentation, hand sketching, observational journaling	Illustrated journals capturing embodied observations and overlooked spatial qualities	Uncovered spatial narratives not visible in conventional data sets
Soundscape & Atmosphere	Transect mapping, audio recording, decibel measurements	Acoustic transects and diagrams mapping auditory conditions across residential areas	Revealed acoustic disparities and stressors across housing zones

For example, the Purpose-Built Corridor (project 6, Table 4), emerged from Phase 1 analyses revealing urban heat, unsafe pedestrian conditions, and acoustically hostile zones. The team synthesized soundscape transects, habitat data, and heat island maps with stakeholder input (including requests for recreational amenities like a skate park) to develop a layered corridor design. Interventions included bioswales, shaded sidewalks, public art, and gathering spaces, integrating health, safety, and mobility improvements aligned with PBN goals.

Students' proposals demonstrate not only representational diversity—through diagrams, renderings, annotated sections, and conceptual illustrations—but also the depth and specificity of design thinking across different groups (Figure 3). These visual outputs reflect the studio's emphasis on using multimodal communication to convey spatial intent, ecological performance, and community alignment, reinforcing how critical research was translated into actionable and context-sensitive landscape interventions. Final presentations took the form of narrative boards that included intervention maps, site-specific plans and sections, visual precedents, and explanatory text. These deliverables reflected interdisciplinary thinking and a strong community orientation, while showcasing student competencies in spatial reasoning, environmental analysis, and design communication. The phase culminated in a gallery-style exhibition and peer-review session, where students received feedback from faculty, peers, and guest critics.

Table 4. Summary of Phase 2 Student Design Proposals and Their Research Foundations

Project Title	Design Focus	Linked Phase 1 Finding(s)	PBN Pillar(s) Addressed
1. Green Corridors & Play Loops	Linear park and trail connecting schools, housing, and flood-prone areas	Lack of green connections; walkability/access gaps to schools and amenities; land cover analysis revealing ecological opportunity corridors	Cradle-to-Career Education; Community Wellness
2. Grocers & Gathering Spaces	Fresh food plaza with cultural market, located in a central transit corridor	Food insecurity in interior zones; walkability analysis showing grocery gaps; SWOT showing interest in food access and cultural activation	Economic Mobility; Community Wellness
3. Youth Empowerment Anchors	Reuse of vacant buildings for after-school arts, tech, and wellness programming	Vacant structures; stakeholder emphasis on youth engagement; gaps in educational assets from school zoning maps	Cradle-to-Career Education
4. Local Business Launchpad	Small business incubators and outdoor markets in underutilized parcels	Economic instability; vacant parcels; SWOT and stakeholder sessions showing desire for entrepreneurship support	Economic Mobility
5. Safe Streets & Cool Routes	Complete streetscapes with shade trees, bioswales, and transit improvements	ADA noncompliance; extreme heat and lack of tree canopy; unsheltered bus stops	Community Wellness; Economic Mobility
6. Purpose-Built Corridor	Streetscape framework connecting 4 major interventions (community center, plaza, parks); integrates public art, community wellness, and economic opportunity	Urban heat islands, soundscape transects showing stress, noise pollution, green space deficits, and safety concerns identified in habitat disposition and soundscape transect	Community Wellness; Economic Mobility; Cradle-to-Career Education
7. Health & Mobility Hub	Multi-use park space with mobile clinic infrastructure and recreation	Gaps in healthcare access; SWOT showing high priority for wellness and walkable services; accessibility mapping of East Eden Park	Community Wellness
8. Memory & Place Interventions	Public plazas and art installations reclaiming historically displaced spaces	Historical timeline overlays and cultural mapping identifying areas of meaning; legacy of displacement through planning and transportation corridors	Community Wellness; Economic Mobility
9. Multi-Purpose Built Community	Network of civic spaces, including a central median plaza, flexible community gathering areas, and a mixed-use center supporting public services and cultural programming	Underutilized corridors; limited access to inclusive gathering spaces; community-identified need for civic infrastructure and programming variety	Community Wellness; Cradle-to-Career Education; Mixed-Income Housing

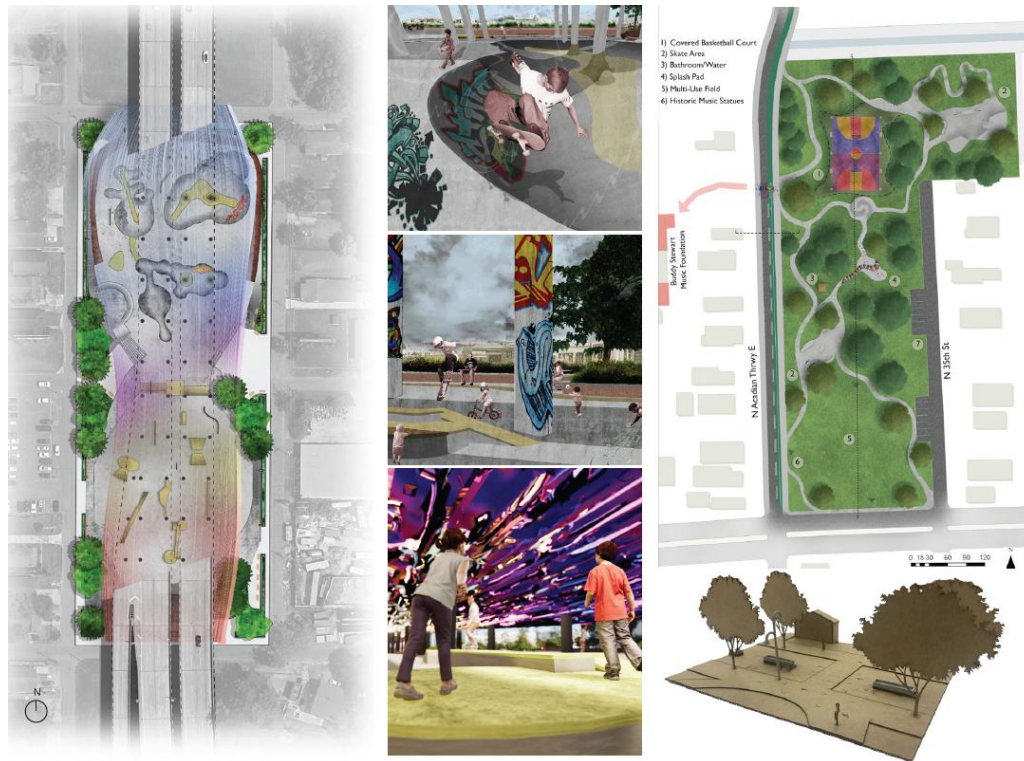


Figure 3. Purpose-Built Corridor Design Strategies (2024). Student proposal addresses heat, noise, and mobility through public space improvements, including a community-requested skate park. Visualizations include diagrams, programming studies, and conceptual renderings. Left/middle by Joseph Brooks; right by Clara Flynn. Used with permission (Studio Archive).

4.3 Evaluation and Learning Outcomes

The assessment of student performance and pedagogical impact in the Purpose-Built Neighborhood studio was conducted through a qualitative, theory-informed framework that aligned learning outcomes with Bloom's Revised Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). By mapping studio activities to distinct cognitive domains, the course facilitated structured progression from foundational understanding to advanced critical thinking and design innovation.

This evaluation was informed by four complementary sources of evidence: (1) individual reflective essays; (2) final design documentation; (3) peer critique sessions; and (4) verbal and written feedback from community stakeholders, and representatives from the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation. These multi-modal sources enabled a comprehensive understanding of student learning across cognitive, affective, and professional dimensions.

Three core learning outcomes emerged from this evaluative process:

- **Empathy and Contextual Awareness:** Student reflections revealed a deepened sensitivity to the lived experiences of Eden Park residents. Many students cited a transformative shift in their approach—from detached problem-solvers to engaged co-creators. This shift was closely tied to experiential methods such as the Drift and stakeholder conversations, which helped surface complex spatial narratives often overlooked in traditional design education.
- **Integration of Analytical and Experiential Reasoning:** Student proposals demonstrated the ability to synthesize data-driven insights (e.g., GIS mapping, accessibility overlays, SWOT matrices) with qualitative field observations and community feedback. This integration reflected intermediate- to high-level cognitive engagement, aligning with the Analyzing and Evaluating levels of Bloom's taxonomy.

- Professional Communication and Civic Accountability: The final public review—featuring feedback from external critics and Foundation representatives—provided students with a platform for real-world accountability. They were required to communicate how their design strategies aligned with both the Purpose-Built Neighborhood framework and community-voiced priorities. This process helped reinforce skills associated with the Evaluating and Creating levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, particularly in articulating design intent and feasibility.

Overall, the studio affirmed the pedagogical value of embedding community-driven research, spatial analysis, and iterative design within a civic engagement framework. By scaffolding student learning across cognitive levels—from Remembering foundational knowledge to Creating original, community-responsive design solutions—the studio fostered a holistic educational experience. This model supports the development of reflective practitioners capable of navigating the intersections of spatial form, equity, and environmental responsibility in landscape architecture.

5 DISCUSSION

This case study contributes to growing scholarship on research-driven and participatory design in landscape architecture education by documenting the impacts of a hybrid studio model applied to a real-world context. Through a two-phase research-to-design framework, the studio invited students to engage deeply with a historically marginalized neighborhood, using experiential, analytical, and collaborative methods to inform site-specific design interventions.

The findings support broader arguments in the literature that community-engaged design studios foster more context-sensitive, socially attuned, and spatially grounded design outcomes (Angotti et al., 2011; Hou, 2010; Brown & Corry, 2011). Rather than relying solely on intuition or precedent, students were asked to integrate GIS data, stakeholder interviews, and site immersion techniques to build complex narratives of place. This approach encouraged students to shift from abstraction toward intentional, evidence-informed proposals.

Several student projects offer concrete illustrations of how this methodology enriched design thinking and aligned proposals with community-identified needs. For instance, the “Grocers & Gathering Spaces” project emerged directly from food access maps and SWOT reflections highlighting grocery store deserts in interior blocks. Students proposed a plaza that merged access to fresh food with cultural and social gathering spaces, drawing on both mapped data and community aspirations voiced during stakeholder conversations.

Similarly, the “Purpose-Built Corridor” project exemplified how data from environmental overlays, sidewalk audits, and noise transects could be translated into a cohesive design intervention. Students used these inputs to locate environmental stress zones and proposed targeted strategies—including tree canopies, public art, and multimodal corridors—to address both functional and experiential gaps in the pedestrian environment. One Foundation staff member noted that the proposal “demonstrated a thoughtful translation of community-informed insights into feasible and inspiring design solutions,” underscoring the pedagogical value of iterative engagement and applied research.

The structure of the studio itself contributed to these outcomes. The initial phase allowed students to test research methods and collect both quantitative and qualitative data, which were shared across groups through collaborative workshops. This promoted cross-pollination of ideas and built a shared knowledge base of the neighborhood. In Phase 2, students drew upon this base to frame their design strategies, moving from thematic group concepts to individualized interventions that addressed specific site conditions. The diversity of final proposals—summarized in Table 4—reflects a range of entry points into community resilience, including economic development, youth empowerment, and public health access.

Importantly, student reflections reveal that the studio experience fostered a deeper understanding of design as an ethical and dialogic process. Several students described a shift in how they conceptualized their role as designers, moving from the idea of authoring solutions to facilitating community visions. This was especially evident in essays referencing the Drift and stakeholder dialogues as moments of transformation, when abstract perceptions of the neighborhood gave way to layered, emotionally resonant readings of place.

The case also highlights broader implications for curriculum development and institutional partnerships. The partnership with the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation was instrumental in grounding the studio in a real-world context. Their engagement brought legitimacy to the students' work and provided a critical feedback loop through which students could test the social and logistical feasibility of their ideas. This kind of collaborative model offers a replicable framework for other programs seeking to align design education with civic engagement and urban resilience goals.

Nonetheless, the project faced limitations. The compressed academic calendar constrained opportunities for iterative engagement, limiting the ability to incorporate sustained community input across multiple phases of design development. Furthermore, the studio was conducted with second-year undergraduate students, many of whom were still in the process of building foundational design and representation skills. While the final projects demonstrated strong conceptual thinking and a commendable sensitivity to social and spatial context, some students faced challenges in translating their ideas into detailed, technically feasible proposals. This gap reflects a common tension in intermediate-level design education between fostering critical inquiry and achieving the level of resolution expected in professional practice.

In summary, this case study demonstrates that embedding participatory, research-driven, and experiential strategies into the studio process can significantly enrich student learning, community responsiveness, and design literacy. By positioning design as a structured inquiry grounded in community dialogue and empirical analysis, the studio cultivated a generation of students better equipped to address spatial equity, environmental responsibility, and ethical design engagement in complex urban contexts.

6 CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pedagogical and professional value of integrating participatory design and interdisciplinary inquiry into landscape architecture education. Through the Purpose-Built Neighborhood (PBN) studio, students were immersed in the complex realities of a historically underserved neighborhood and guided through a structured, two-phase research-to-design process. The outcomes demonstrate how hybrid methodologies—blending spatial analysis, embodied observation, stakeholder engagement, and iterative design—can deepen students' contextual understanding while producing proposals grounded in community-identified needs.

The research validates the PBN framework as both a pedagogical and practical tool for addressing systemic urban challenges. Students not only responded to the four PBN pillars (Cradle-to-Career Education, Mixed-Income Housing, Community Wellness, and Economic Mobility) but also learned to critically analyze socio-spatial dynamics through site-responsive design thinking. By moving from exploratory mapping to targeted design interventions, students demonstrated an increased capacity to synthesize qualitative and quantitative data, translate community insights into spatial strategies, and articulate proposals that reflect both design intent and implementation potential.

Moreover, the studio model illustrated the potential of academic-nonprofit partnerships to produce mutual benefit. The collaboration with the Huey and Angelina Wilson Foundation provided students with a real-world platform for civic engagement, while generating design-based knowledge that can inform future planning initiatives in Eden Park. The foundation's role as both stakeholder and reviewer added a layer of accountability often missing from traditional design studios, reinforcing the importance of clarity, responsiveness, and professional rigor in student work.

Beyond the classroom, the methodological framework developed in this studio offers practical applications for community planning, philanthropic investment, and policy-making. The research-to-design process outlined here can serve as a replicable model for institutions seeking to center equity, resilience, and participation in urban transformation efforts. It also highlights the critical role of landscape architects in mediating between data and lived experience, spatial systems, and social values.

While the outcomes of this study are promising, further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of student proposals and the potential for implementation. Future iterations of the studio may benefit from extended engagement with residents and iterative prototyping, as well as partnerships with city agencies to evaluate feasibility. Comparative studies across different geographic and demographic contexts could also expand understanding of how place-based factors shape participatory design processes. In

conclusion, the Purpose-Built Neighborhood studio demonstrates how a participatory and research-driven pedagogical model can cultivate socially engaged designers capable of advancing equitable urban futures. By aligning academic inquiry with community-driven aspirations, the studio positioned design as a tool for empowerment, advocacy, and transformative change.

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