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## **Design as Activism: Position and Pedagogy**

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### **Abstract:**

Activist education is a deliberate educational method in which participants engage in guided learning activities that help them to see themselves as capable of making a difference in the world. This paper summarizes the case study of Interior Design Senior Studio completed in Spring 2021, where the students took up the role of an activist. They researched ongoing social-political, economic, and cultural issues affecting the local communities through participatory and self-reflective processes. Students questioned democratic norms and provided activist visions to support the community and achieve social progress through their design response.

### **Introduction:**

In the past decade, activist movements and citizen collectives such as Black Lives Matter, Dark Matter University, Occupy, and 350.org have come together to act on racism, income inequality, and climate change, respectively (Niblett, 2017). These groups bring attention to social issues and demonstrate that citizen participation is a vital component of the contemporary human story. Design education should adapt to the changing and complex social context to equip students to respond to these disparities (DeVore, 2012). The complete integration of social responsibility into the university design curriculum has been slower in response to contemporary societal issues (Jones, 2002). The call for design educators should be to explore design education as a tool to understand the world and project all voices (Zingoni, 2019). We should be able to provide our students with the tools they need to become agents of change by addressing issues of equity, culture, and belonging as part of their design process. The question becomes, how can we explore both the centripetal activities (those reinforcing the core values of our discipline) and centrifugal activities (those directed towards absorbing additional information that exists at the periphery of the discipline) (Coy, 2003)? How can we move beyond prescriptive thinking and empower students with the necessary resources to become democratic thinkers?

In light of the foregoing, this article explains the position and pedagogy of the author's Interior Design Senior Studio, Spring 2021, which focused on exploring existing social issues embedded in the contemporary regional landscape and engaging students in design activism. Engaging in activism through design is about putting social change in the center of design thinking and

practice (Hou, 2019). The ten Interior Design senior students, who were a part of this semester-long studio project, took up the role of an activist as they researched ongoing local social-political, economic, and cultural issues and addressed them through participatory and self-reflective processes. As a studio, the commitment was towards exploring, researching, testing, and developing the design solution, responding imaginatively and ethically to social issues. The article will cover the compelling need for this interior design studio to take an activist approach to design, the design pedagogy and process of the semester-long studio project embedded in the studio, project outcomes, and student perspectives on how this studio and project impacted their thinking.

### **Literature Review-Activist Pedagogy:**

Dewey (1938) saw education as a social process and emphasized explorations of issues-based curriculum that deal with local and global concerns. Considering the progressive and current global crisis such as climate change, unfair distribution of wealth, political flaws, and inadequate educational and healthcare reveal the importance and the need for creative solutions that design can bring in our daily lives on a personal or collective basis (Özgür & Bijan, 2015). In the past decade, activist movements and citizen collectives have come together to act on racism, income inequality, and climate change (Niblett, 2017). In these conditions, design pedagogy has the responsibility of preparing students to address the environmental, economic, and social problems that we face as a local and global community (Kwok et al., 2014). The classroom should become an open environment where crucial problems affecting the quality of life of individuals who are disadvantaged due to circumstances beyond their immediate control are constructively discussed (Smith et al., 2016). This approach is acknowledged by both students and researchers (Davies, 2006) as one of the essential instructional strategies that educators can employ to foster the development of informed judgments and responsive action (Sears, 2004). Successful activist educators design learning environments that facilitate the feeling of safety and inclusion, foster critical thinking and meaningful collaboration with the community (Purkey & Novak, 2008).

Activist education can be defined as an intentional educational practice in which participants engage in guided learning activities that help them understand themselves as capable of effecting change for social and ecological justice (Niblett, 2014). This aligns with the democratic dispositions proposed by Dewey (1938) that all students are moral equals, capable of rational judgment and action, and competent to work together to resolve conflicts and solve problems. Hands-on, empathetic, imaginative, and at least partially student-directed activities characterize activist education learning (Carr, 2011). Cultivating a classroom environment where students feel empowered to ask critical questions is crucial to incubate ideas and actions that can be tested, practiced, and refined in the real world. Similarly, design education should empower future designers to understand the true concerns of a community and generate an effective solution for their welfare and not just respond to the clients' needs.

### **Position and Pedagogy for the Interior Design Studio:**

According to a review of the present Interior Design curriculum, the integration of current social challenges into the curriculum has been inadequate in response to contemporary issues,

challenges, and movements. The author was scheduled to teach the Interior Design senior studio in spring 2021 and wanted to seize this opportunity to assist the students about what role to play as designers in building a better equilibrium in the future. The ten students who took part in this studio studied the region's sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts throughout the course of a semester-long project. They identified the social issue of interest and met with the non-profits, activists, and community leaders working on this issue to gain further insight and developed a project proposal. The proposal's objective was to educate communities, bridge social divisions, reimagine local economies in our urban environment, and attract new audiences. Through multiple perspectives, debates, active participatory research, and empathy studies, the students learned to develop informed opinions that resulted in socially responsible interior design solutions. Incubator spaces (community innovation centers or workspaces), pipeline spaces (transitional spaces to empower the community), or shelter spaces (a place to rest, heal, and reflect) are among the types of design solutions proposed by the students for these communities.

### **Design Process and Studies Embedded in the Interior Design Studio:**

The semester-long project was divided into three modules, each of which incorporated activist education dispositions and Dewey's educational framework. Students were required to submit a reflection after completing each module.

#### **Module 1: Research, Reflection, and Proposal**

The first five-week module focused on the development of project ideas rooted in societal challenges in North-East Ohio into a clear design proposal that would become a gateway to design programming and the process. Programming allows for the dissection of the project context by identifying broader issues such as human factors, environmental responsibilities, social and cultural influences on the design (Robinson, 2020). An external dialog with activists, practitioners, non-profits, and educators invited to the studio influenced the project proposal. The students were encouraged to seek out community activists/educators/practitioners to learn about the social issues of their interest. Students then conducted an extensive literature review of the topic of interest, and the policies and parameters surrounding the topic, approached the non-profit working on the issue, sought out alternative perspectives about the issue, explored associated theories and practices, precedent studies, and the site. By sharing their experiences, thoughts, perspectives, and ideals with external voices and within the studio, the students were able to comprehend the issue of interest and turn it into a finite design proposal (Sorensen, 1996).

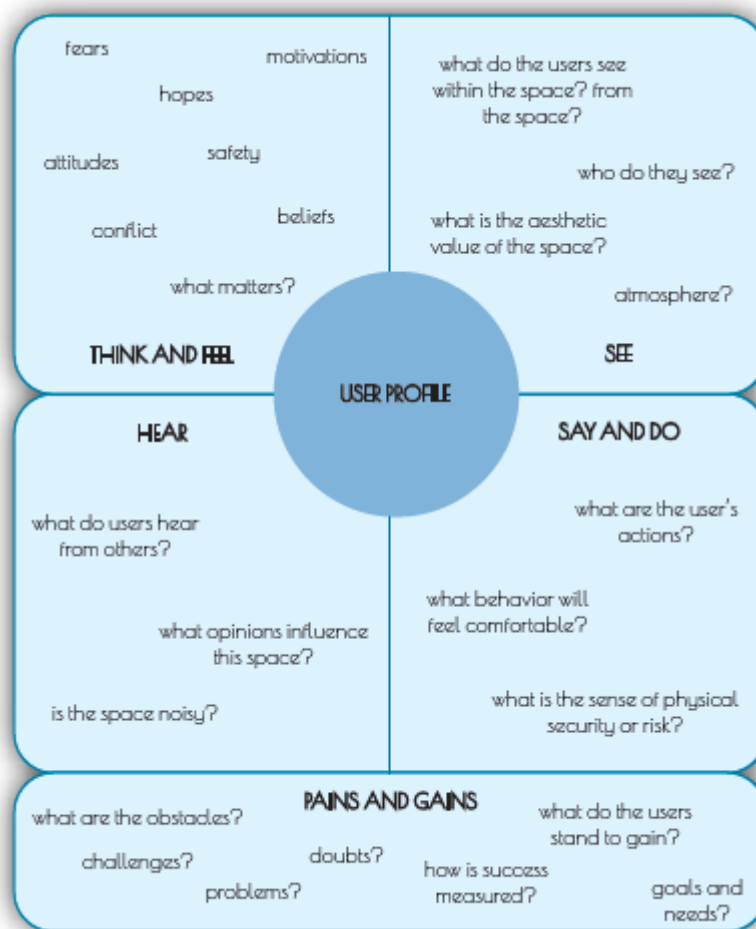
#### **Module 2: Empathy, Reflection, and Conceptualization**

The second five-week module focused on ideation, conceptualization, and schematic design development of the project proposal. Most students in design studios use the method of decomposing the general schema provided by the design program, generating concepts from it, and finally arriving at a formal articulation of the interior space (Swaranjali, Patel & Espersen-Peters, 2020). This linear methodological process leads to functional solutions to a 'problem' and fails to create a meaningful, empathetic, and experiential spatial narrative for such complex issues. The instructor proposed a series of studies, which act as heuristic tools to assist in

empathizing with users, and their position and open new perspectives for design solutions through iterations. Heuristic reasoning refers to a problem-solving process in which any procedure, prior episode, or other device contributes to a reduction in the search for a satisfactory solution and focuses on testing more imaginative outcomes (Rowe, 1998).

### **Study 1: Empathy Map**

Empathy is defined as the ability to identify, understand, and feel other individuals' thoughts, feelings, and circumstances, and respond consequently to them (Gerdes et al., 2011; Howe 2013). Empathetically designed spaces could improve and enrich people's physical, emotional, and social interactions, adding value to the design responses (Tellez Bohorquez, 2017). The students were tasked with creating an empathy map for their users, as shown in Figure 1, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu). An empathy map depicts the users' thoughts, feelings, needs, motivations, attitudes, and beliefs, issues and helped the students connect to the users.



### **Study 2: Poem and Felt Space Collage**

Alan Shapiro, an American poet, has explored family, grief, domesticity, and the everyday aspects of life through classic poetry genres. Shapiro has published over ten poetry collections, including *Life Pig* by University of Chicago Press, 2016; *Reel to Reel* by University of Chicago Press, 2014; *Night of the Republic* by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, a finalist for the 2013 Griffin Poetry Prize and National Book Award; and *Old War* by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008, winner of the Ambassador Book Award (Poetry Foundation, *Alan R. Shapiro* 2020). The students

read the poem from his collection, where he presents a new perspective of everyday spaces. They selected the poem which resonated best with their user group. After reflection on the poem, they had to imagine a day in life in the shoes of their users and create a collage depicting feelings, attitudes, mental state, and journey. The student reflection statements indicate that the study helped them change naturalized viewpoints and positions about people undergoing different circumstances and spaces.

### ***Study 3: Goals and Conceptualization***

After completing the two studies, the students reassessed the programmatic and project goals they had set, through the lens of the evolving and changing perspectives on users revealed by the aforementioned research. They selected a series of images (photographically or through other graphic media) to assemble an atmospheric collection that elicits the aura or develops the feel of the spatial strategies they would use to generate a design response. Before the development of schemes, the students were asked to create one of the following: a surface, an inspirational object, or a diorama (a diorama, is a constructed scene contained within a three-dimensional frame, has an intriguing history and enduring influences). These could be crafted manually, as a physical model or virtually, using tools like Revit, Rhino and Adobe Creative Suite [1]. The physical composition can have an interplay of solids and voids, have depth, pattern and color. Besides, this surface/object/scene should have the capacity to form a positive emotional and sensory association with the users of their space.

### ***Study 4: Translation***

The students were encouraged to refine the spatial program (type of spaces, number of spaces, and function of space) first, then using the elements/strategies/concept of the object/scene they had envisioned in the previous studies to morph it to define the theme, mood, experience, levels of intensity, and density in the space. They used sketch drawings to explore and generate ideas, test ideas and search for new ideas. According to Spankie (2009), collage is seen as a method of producing and as a method of thinking about space. The creation of a collage becomes an intellectual activity requiring the placement of one fragment next to another. This ability to see the fragment's potential to the whole becomes a method of thinking about space in three dimensions. An alternate to sketching, some students chose collage to generate a concept for space.

According to students' comments and educator's observations, the students gained the ability to make logical decisions and actions, empathize with their users, and address the ambiguous nature of these complex social problems as a result of these heuristic ideation experiments. They then translated the ideas into section, plan, and perspective drawings, shifting back and forth between these representation modes. The students presented the final concept and schematic design phase to a group of external reviewers and members of a non-profit for feedback.

### **Module 3: Solution Finding/Design Response**

The last four-week module focused on refinement of the program and floor plan as per feedback and three-dimensional development. The outcome took the form of a digital and poster presentation that communicated the essence of their design proposal.



## Project Outcomes and Students Reflection:

Each student conducted research and developed a unique and sensitive design solution that addressed current social issues in north-east Ohio, such as an afterschool learning center for at-risk youth, an adult education center, a performing arts center, a veterans art initiative center, a LGBTQ resource center, a day service center for homeless and returning citizens, and incubator space for women as pipeline and incubator space types and shelter for women who have been abused and homeless. The synthesis of three student project showcase research, studies, and design solution.

The first project focuses on Youth-at-Risk. Through research, the student identified the non-profit in the region that supports underprivileged youth and inspires them to reach their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens. With 2,900 children in North East Ohio experiencing homelessness and a 48.7% poverty rate [2], this non-profit would like to expand its service to develop an enthusiasm for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). STEM programs allow students who are under-represented in these disciplines to work on projects, solve problems, and experiment without the risk of failure or low grades. After learning more about youth at risk through media, talking with community members, non-profits, and parents, the student generated the program for this facility. The heuristic studies lead to refinement of the program and development of programmatic concepts such as access and ownership to instill discipline, belonging, and pride. Figure 2, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu) demonstrates the studies



Figure 3, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu) shows the final solution demonstrating the classroom, lounging, and sensory spaces for at-risk youth.



Sensory Room Level 1



Tech-Space



Classrooms



Stair to First Floor



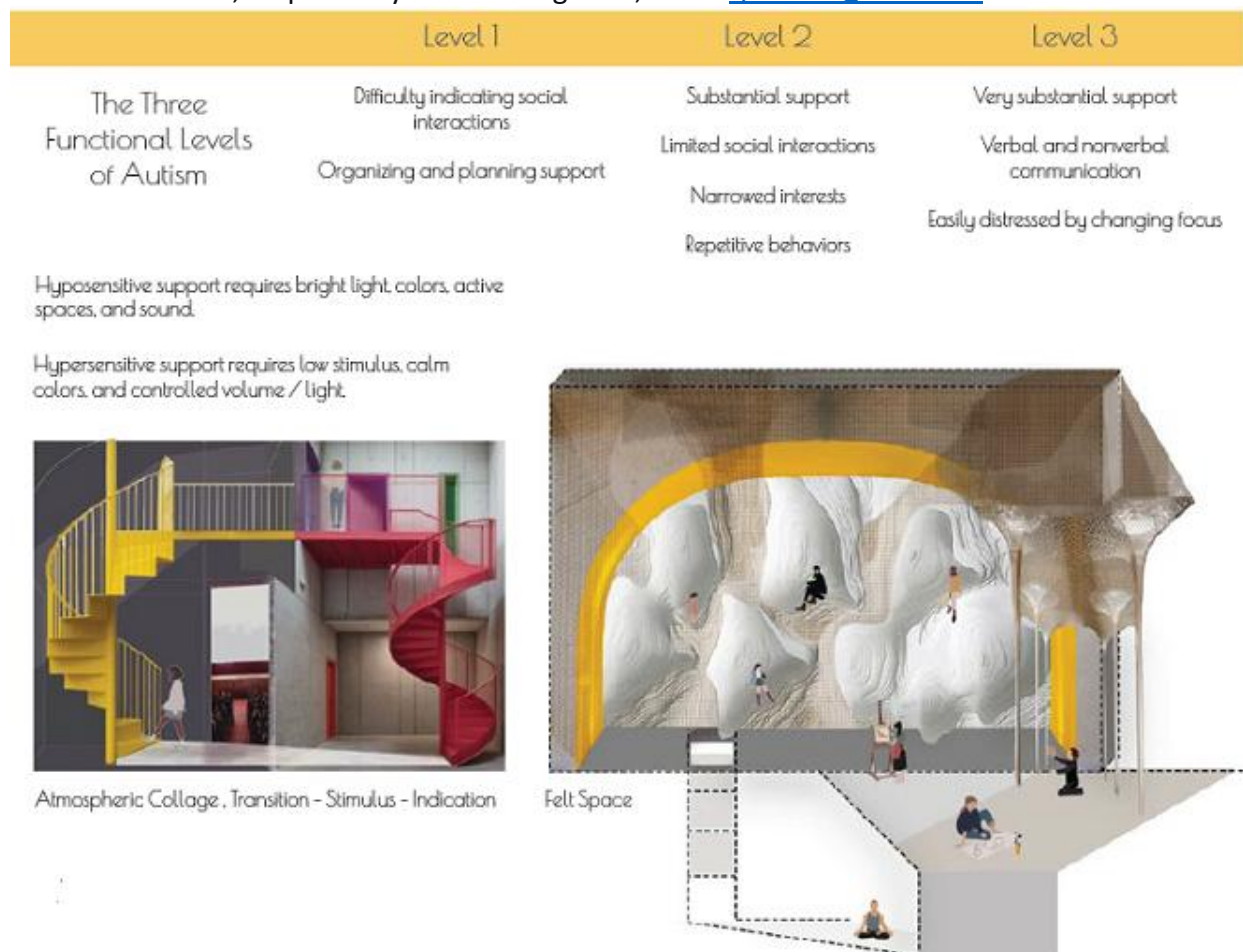
First Floor



River Level

The student's research for the second project highlighted that 1 of 54 children in the United States is born on the Autism Spectrum (ASD) [3]. The literature review indicated while theatre and the performing arts are not a common holistic therapy approach for youth with ASD, they can play a significant role in building self-esteem and learning basic life skills. Through an extensive dialog with Intervention Specialists, Artists, Specialists focusing on ASD, and literature review, the project proposes to create a performing arts center for youth with ASD.

Empathy exercises and experiential collages prompted a design with curved geometry on the first level and rectangular geometry on the second to meet the needs of hyper and hypo-sensitive children, respectively shown in figure 4, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu).



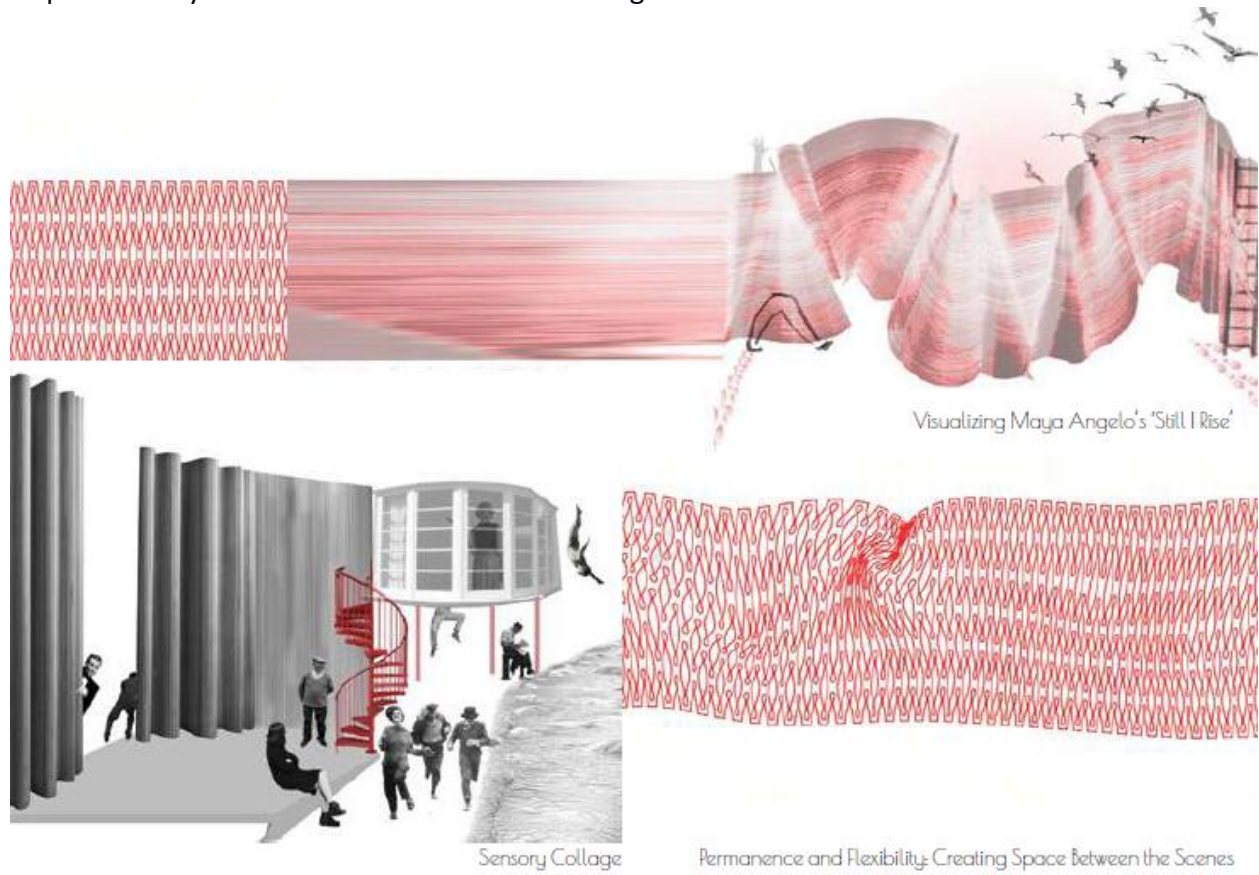


A high stimulus theatre focuses on music and familiar dramas, while a low stimulus theatre focuses on mentoring, segmentation, and controlled sensory levels, shown in figure 5, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu). The transitional sensory spaces create zones to recollect and focus and a neutral support area encouraging social interactions and circulation.

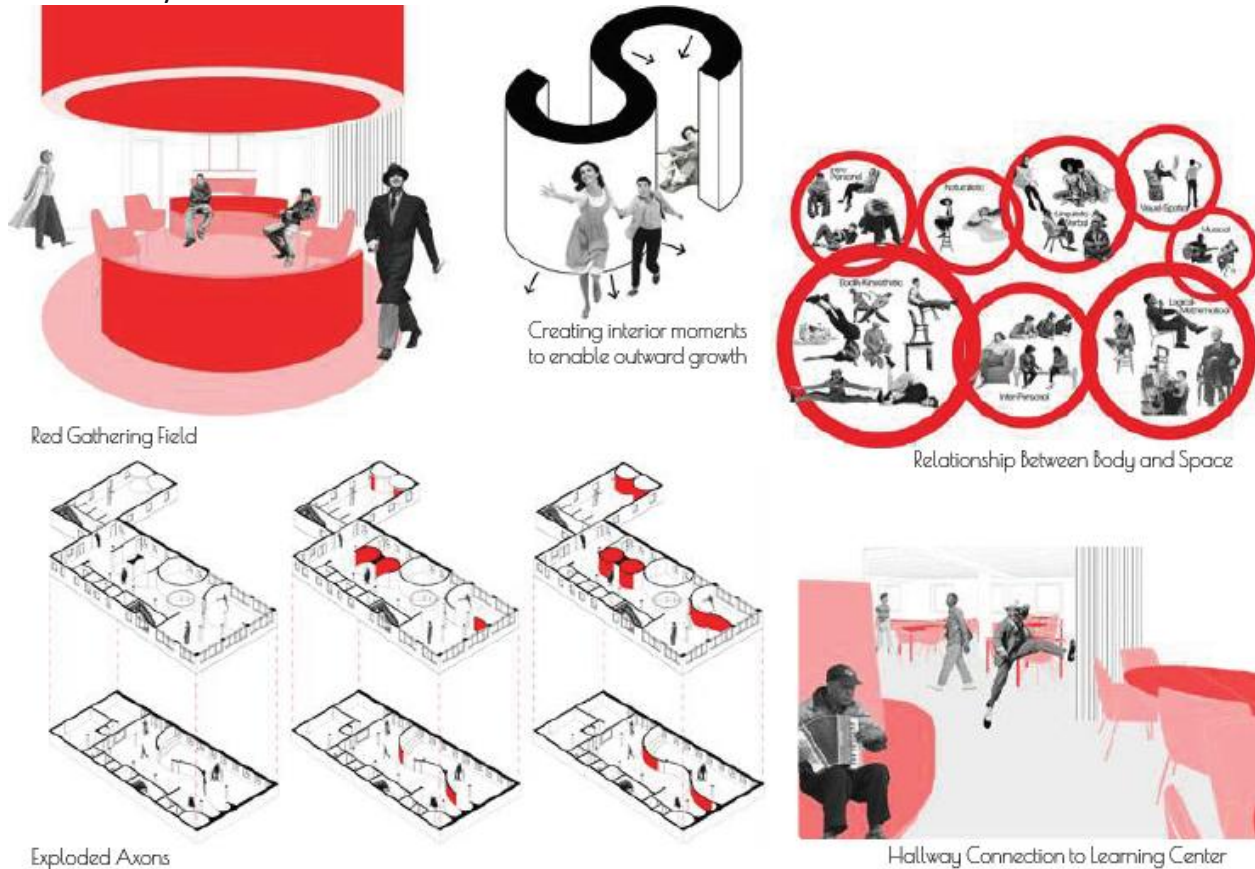


The third project indicates a 29.61% poverty rate in a small town in northeast Ohio [4] and a lack of financially accessible career and workplace development opportunities along public transit routes. The student partnered with a non-profit that provides free educational services to nearly 30,000 adults across the state [5]. The new facility will provide opportunities for those who have not completed high school, those looking to advance their careers, and adults wanting to strengthen their technology skills.

Figure 6, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu) shows how the poem, concept objects, and collage study helped identify the users' emotional and learning needs.



The design aimed to create flexible learning spaces to accommodate diverse learning modes, following Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, through curved movable custom partitions as indicated in figure 7, Email [tpatel10@kent.edu](mailto:tpatel10@kent.edu). The spaces foster interaction, socialization, informal and formal learning, and opportunities to focus through physically and economically accessible education to area residents.



### Discussion and Future Implication:

Through their work students challenged the economic, social, cultural, and democratic norms and proposed alternative activist visions to support the community and achieve social progress. Feedback from the non-profits indicated that they were impressed with student's sensitivity towards these issues and end-users. They would like to use these projects for fundraising purposes in the future. Students wrote reflection statements on what they learned through this studio. Critical thinking, problem-solving, comprehension of many ideas and cultures, awareness of diversity, independence/interdependence, resilience, and tolerance of ambiguity were rated highly by students. Reflecting on the studies, research, and final project result, the instructor, who is also the author, believes that the experience increased students' sensitivity and that each stage of the project provided students with a new skill, understanding of the issue, and an empathetic design thinking strategy.

Verma (2017) proposed a theoretical framework for social design pedagogy as a solution-finding process where the designer strives to comprehend the environment in which solutions would find congruency, not just to seek a resolution. It necessitates both a broad awareness and a deep social competency of the frame of reference within which the solutions proposed will ultimately function. To summarize, the case study of the Interior Design Studio, 2021, focusing on the semester long project on design as activism, illustrates vulnerable interiority produces more inclusive placed-based experiences and incorporates a theoretical framework that addresses issues of equity, culture, and belonging through its process. It exposed the students to design beyond aesthetics (Zingoni, 2019). This studio project is just the beginning as it encourages educators to take advantage of the current and ongoing global and local turmoil to reposition interior design education through democratic pedagogies and processes. It also advances our discipline and prepares our students to be compassionate global citizens, democratic thinkers, and community stewards. This will be an evolutionary process of discovery, connection, reflection, contribution, and impact (Patel, 2021).

## ENDNOTES

- [1] Rhino, Rhinoceros is a commercial 3D computer graphics and computer-aided design application software, <https://www.rhino3d.com/> ; Revit, Autodesk Revit is a building information modelling software, <https://www.autodesk.com/products/revit/overview> and Adobe Creative Suite, set of applications used for graphic design, <https://www.adobe.com/creativecloud.html>
- [2] 2019 Overview of the numbers. Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless. (2019). <https://www.neoch.org/2019-overview-of-the-numbers>.
- [3] Autism Statistics and Facts. Autism Speaks. (n.d.). <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-statistics-asd>.
- [4] The Office of Research. (2020). (rep.). The Ohio Poverty Report. Columbus, OH.
- [5] The Office of Research. (2020). (rep.). The Ohio Poverty Report. Columbus, OH.

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