Small Town Retail + Cultural Diversity + Extension + University Design Students = New Solutions to New Challenges

2015 Community Development Society Meeting
Creativity and Culture
Community

Extension

Classroom
Old Problems

- Aging population
- Small towns becoming smaller
- Rural retail can’t compete
- New residents/immigrants
- Changing ethnic profile
New Challenges

- Shifting ethnic demographics of retail owners
- Increased visual presence of ethnic retail in downtown districts
- Need for adaptive reuse of aging building stock
- On-line shopping
- Brain drain
PLACE: Partnering Learning and Community Engagement

- Outreach program for College of Design
- Aims to enhance and promote the quality and character of Iowa's communities
- 7 academic depts.
- Provided by EXT CED
Goals of PLACE program

Meet Community needs while finding studio projects which:

- Meet academic needs of students
- Offer an adequate level of complexity
- Relate topically to offered courses
- Meet professors’ needs for research, teaching
Strengths of PLACE

• Driven by community needs, casts wide net
• Links to Extension-CED
• Students’ academic experience
  – More engaged learning
  – Immersion into Iowa
• Entrée for faculty into communities
PLACE as boundary spanner

- Integrating CED field staff
  - Project recruitment
  - Local organizer, recruiter
  - Ground-truthing
  - Project follow-up
Retail Design Project

Typical project:
• Engaging with local rural retail owners
  – Students address
    • Storefronts and entrances
    • Planning and circulation
    • Merchandising
    • Materials and finishes
    • Lighting
    • Graphics
    • Behind the scenes
Retail Design Project

• The Innovation: Storm Lake
  – PLACE becomes cross-cultural mediator to bring together multiple communities in a non-threatening environment
  – Having outside student experts provide interventions to address common retail design issues
  – Students help draw the focus to the educational process and not on the community conflict
  – PLACE creates a neutral space
Storm Lake Goals

• Address aesthetic differences through design principles that incorporated cultural elements and economic constraints

• Create a common space of interaction between Latino retailers and Anglo business community

• Provide technical assistance to a large number of retailers (using student work to amplify outreach)
Recipe for Success?

• Providing a service viewed as valuable by all partners (Latino and Anglo retailers, community leaders, and ISU)

• Project resonated with concerns of the Anglo community

• Chamber was open, willing and recognized the need

• On-going relationships and outreach prior to and after implementation by ISUEO
Lessons learned

• Have to have trusted contacts for this to work

• Language was not a barrier because we utilized local resources

• Willingness of Latino businesses to participate and genuine openness to ideas

• Many immigrant business owners feel stuck in the retail space they rent – the project ideas reinforced this sentiment
Project Results

• Three of the seven Latino businesses implemented parts of the students’ suggestions within 1 year (zero of the Anglo businesses have)

• Two of the participating seven businesses are Chamber members

• One of the seven Latino businesses has since closed
Next steps

- Using purposeful engagement strategies to encourage more interaction between Anglo and Latino store owners
- Additional engaged courses to address other retail needs
- Addressing culturally specific retail design, especially around window displays
Why is it Worth the Extra Effort?

• PLACE:
  – Include a new project dimension
  – Reach out to ethnic retailers is key to future

• University Academic Departments:
  – Enhanced student learning
  – Knowledge exchange between local communities, students, and faculty
  – Raise awareness of discipline
Why is it Worth the Extra Effort?

• Field Staff:
  – As a bridge to get in the door, yielding an opportunity to bring services to local businesses.
  – Amplify reach of technical assistance
  – Laid the foundation for future projects with Latino business owners to offer other kinds of business assistance
  – Local press (English and Spanish) for the project raised the profile of Latino businesses and Chamber of Commerce
Questions?

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