

Report

A DESIGNED CONVERSATION

The Development of a Design Project

BY JESSICA SMITH

The role of questioning what makes a product “responsible” is a vital part of contemporary design discourse. Today students are keenly interested in developing a sustainable studio practice that is socially and environmentally responsible. In support of this practice, the Fibers Department at the Savannah College of Art and Design submitted a proposal to the International Contemporary Furniture Fair. The project’s mission statement said the students’ goal is “to create sustainable bedding solutions for people in non-traditional living situations.” (See www.designedconversation.com).

Our department has had a continuing relationship with the creative program at a local homeless shelter, Growing Hope Union Mission (GHUM). In applying to ICFF, the Mission seemed a logical partner for our endeavor. We were thrilled when ICFF accepted our proposed collaboration. We set about to design and exhibit our project and ideas, and subsequently were honored with the show’s award for Best Design School.

The project has been lots of work and an incredible experience for all of us. This Special Topics class was led by two faculty members and composed of 14 students from the Fibers and Furniture Design Departments. The project would not have gotten off the ground, however, without the support of our Chairs and Dean. In a short amount of time, they made faculty and space available, and found enough money to fund the entire venture.

Armed with a reading list and good intentions, we first met with the clients at GHUM. In small groups, the students spoke with these clients about three transitional living situations: living on the streets, in the shelter, and in transitional (short-term apartment-style) housing. Students asked questions, posed ideas and developed designs to address the needs of the clients. Safety, privacy, and psychological comfort seemed to be over-arching issues that the students sought to address.

Teri Schell of GHUM organized the project on the Mission’s end. Her clients were an integral part of the design process. Their commitment to our students was a testament to the success of the GHUM program that aims “to use expressive arts as a vehicle to support and enhance the transition from homelessness and poverty to self-sufficiency.” Participants are able to express themselves through their arts and crafts, gain confidence, build a stronger sense of community, and possibly supplement their income.” (http://www.unionmission.org/growing_hope.asp)



The students determined that the best way to make this project sustainable was to design objects that utilized both limited space and sewing skills in production. This was a challenge to our students, as they had been encouraged throughout their academic careers to think beyond their technical skills. Instead, they were now being forced to make design decisions based upon ease of production. The most functional choice was not necessarily the most aesthetically intriguing.

An important conversation that emerged from this collaboration was the role of the consumer. Our initial response was that the products could not cost money. The student designers soon learned that this assumption was incorrect. If the products adequately met their needs, and remained within a reasonable price point, these clients could purchase the object and/or the supplies to make it.

In actuality, the products produced by the class were the blueprints for the three prototypes of bedding which were demonstrated at ICFF. Whether for sale or for personal use, the designs become the property of the clients who are making them. In addition to giving GHUM the blueprints, we have posted them on the Designed Conversation blog in hope that shelters across the country will utilize this project. Community-organized sewing groups may also benefit from this unique opportunity. Organizations could either make and donate the items, or set up programs to utilize the blueprints to teach skills to underserved populations. While there are apt concerns regarding copyright, for now, the blueprints are open and free with a hope that they will be used for the genuine goals of the project.

This project is a work in progress. For the educators involved, it has been an invaluable experience as a pedagogical model for community-oriented design. The student-designed prototypes were engaging solutions to the needs of the clients. Finally, the project required everyone involved to work together to challenge preconceived notions about what it means to be homeless, to be a designer, and to question who, in fact, determines the needs of a client.

—Jessica Smith is Fibers Professor at Savannah College of Art and Design.



ABOVE:
 Jessica Smith, Fibers Professor at SCAD (front row, kneeling, right) and Teri Schell, Community Arts and Wellness Educator (front row, kneeling, left) with students from the Fibers and Furniture Department and clients from Growing Hope Union Mission.

LEFT:
 Project on display at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, Javits Center, New York City, 2008.

RIGHT:
 Students constructing a bed pod.
TOP RIGHT: A bed pod.
BELOW: A tentcot.

