SEEDING GRASSROOTS URBANISM

The idea behind this studio is that the city may develop its life and character through the actions of many different people—builders, architects, community activists, citizens, teens, elders, volunteers and entrepreneurs. This is grassroots urbanism, and it operates from the bottom up, alongside the activities of conventional developers, urban designers and planners. The project is a building for an organization that can further this idea through action and research. It is a Center for Grassroots Urbanism: a hub for city building and rebuilding. Although based on an actual project in Portland, there will be a choice of two sites, one in Portland, and the other in London.

In Portland, the “Rebuilding Center” deconstructs, recycles, refinishes and sells building components—windows, doors, plumbing fixtures and many other things. The proceeds help finance “Our United Villages,” (OUV) a non-profit community organization that sponsors community projects of all kinds and generally works to empower local stakeholders. OUV (the property holder) wants to rebuild, and develop its property in a way that retains and enhances the Rebuilding Center with workshops, a research center, a place for community meetings and informal gathering, and short-term housing for visitors. Our studio, a Center for Grassroots Urbanism, is based on these intentions.

Each student will develop their own program—and an overall approach to the project—during a fall term seminar. It will include such elements as:

- the Rebuilding Center
- workshops for carpentry and fabrication
- a grassroots urbanism research center featuring advanced digital technologies
- a large community room for debates, lectures and performances
- an outdoor gathering/performance space
- housing for visiting builders, architects, researchers and community activists

The total area will be around 60,000 square feet.

There are two possible sites: one in Portland’s Boise neighborhood and the other in London’s Dalston neighborhood, each with a range of urban challenges and opportunities. The Portland site is the actual site of the existing Rebuilding Center on N Mississippi Avenue, in an active neighborhood with a variety of people and businesses. The Center is considering undergoing re-development soon. The London site features an incredibly varied mix of ethnicities and cross-cultural overlap. The site is in a new square called Gillett Square, a great example in itself of grassroots urbanism. The sites will inform each other: the Rebuilding Center is a model for the program on both sites; the London site is a model of how grassroots urbanism can work.

Both sites are at the heart of neighborhoods undergoing upward movement in land values, or “gentrification”. An additional issue will be how non-profit organizations can help local residents rise with the economic tide while maintaining their unique culture, rather than being forced to relocate elsewhere.

The studio and seminar will emphasize if and how grassroots city making can be an aspect of sustainable urbanism and the role of a new “institution” and its architecture in supporting such an approach to city making. Following from that discussion, we will focus on how architectural design and details can play a role in generating a sense of pride, unity and identity for communities.

The fall seminar will be devoted to project and program definition, precedent studies, and site investigations. We will visit the Portland site and also have an optional field trip to London at the end of the fall term. On this trip, we will study the site, visit germane projects and architectural offices, and enjoy this great city.

Based on the individual programs devised in the fall seminar, the first term of studio will be devoted to schematic design, with two full cycles of design leading to schematic resolution of the project (concept, and spatially resolved plans, sections and elevations). Comprehensive design, a professional attitude and frequent interaction—weekly pinups and discussions—will be the mode of the studio.

The spring term will be devoted to the detailed development of the tectonics of the building and translating the schematic concepts into material expression at all scales. This will include integration of building systems and the articulation of detailed approaches to the environmental context, thermal comfort and light, in ways that reinforce the underlying conceptual propositions. In the end, we will show how a building devoted to community purposes can be designed with architecture that is inspiring and beautiful.