Sustainable Architecture Module:

Recycling and Reuse of Building Materials

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Abstract

We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference.

—John Dewey

As part of the Sustainable Architecture Compendium, this educational module on the Recycling and Reuse of Building Materials demonstrates an interdisciplinary and place-based approach to architectural education. The professor and student are provided with a “blueprint” in the form of four learning units, which cover waste prevention, construction and demolition recycling, architectural reuse, and design for recovery.

Each learning unit is further subdivided to expose nested topics. These are structured to include interdisciplinary discussions of the background and theory, case study examples describing the “real-world” application of the theory, and “field” exercises that encourage students to venture out of the studio and explore the issues within their own community and region.

This is not intended as a stand-alone document. Recycling and reuse issues overlap a range of disciplines including architecture, construction, ecology, economics, industrial design, manufacturing, art, and public policy, to name a few. Throughout the module are references to other works that enable the architecture educator and student to investigate ideas beyond those revealed here. The methodology for research integrated the review of existing and evolving literature, personal interviews, a survey of regional case studies, and the design and construction of a community demonstration project.
Introduction

Background

In *Building Community*, a special report on architecture education and practice, Ernest Boyer and Lee Mitgang recognize the need for architecture schools to join with other disciplines to help students “expand their knowledge of energy, the use of renewable resources, the recycling process, the use of carcinogenic materials, and the safe disposal of waste.”¹ To satisfy this need, Boyer and Mitgang espouse an integrative, “learning by doing” approach to architectural education that reaches out to other academic departments as well as to the community. They remind us that “schools of architecture can no longer afford to be strangers in their own settings.”² Their suggested reforms include:

1) tying studios to more “real life problems;”

2) developing “a fabric of many voices in studio instruction;”

3) replacing the “architect as hero” model with “architect as team player;” and

4) “promoting an interdisciplinary/collaborative approach among designers, sociologists, ecologists, etc.”³

If “wisdom is the capacity to know what we don’t know,” what Wes Jackson of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, calls ignorance-based thinking,⁴ then it stands to reason that no single discipline is equipped with the ability to solve all of the problems associated with the steady stream of wastes entering our environment. No longer are we able to work in a vacuum, blindly making decisions without regard to the spill-over effects. The merging of disciplines is essential.

David Wann’s *Biologic* and *Deep Design* and Sim Van der Ryn and Stuart Cowen’s *Ecological Design* describe the attitudes and applications of synthesizing technology and ecology, while stressing the importance of an interdisciplinary and place-based approach to design. Pliny Fisk III, William McDonough, John Tillman Lyle, and Sim Van der Ryn are examples of some architects whose work reflects this approach and who recognize that human processes at a local or regional scale contain useful byproducts requiring systematic planning for their recapture.⁵
Van der Ryn’s first principle of ecological design, “Solutions Grow From Place,” states that

Ecological design begins with an intimate knowledge of a particular place. Therefore, it is small-scale and direct, responsive to both the local conditions and local people. If we are sensitive to the nuances of place, we can inhabit without destroying.  

This principle is rooted to the regional survey proposed by Lewis Mumford in *Values for Survival*. The survey becomes

[the] backbone of a drastically revised method of study, in which every aspect of the sciences and arts is ecologically related from the bottom up, in which they connect directly and constantly in the student’s experience of his (or her) region and community.  

Industrial and natural processes are at work in everyone’s backyard. To gain an awareness of this interaction requires us to turn our attentions outward — beyond the architecture studio and the profession. Randy Croxton of Croxton Collaborative, Architects, suggests reaching beyond the traditional expertise of architects comfortably tucked between *Sweet’s Catalog* of building products and the construction documents. In *The Audubon House*, Croxton examines the role of the architect “upstream” as well as “downstream” throughout the design process of the National Audubon Society offices in New York City. He addresses natural resource extraction, transportation, manufacturing, and distribution as well as building operation, maintenance, and disposal strategies after the building’s usefulness has expired.

Considering the environmental effects of a material or building throughout its existence from extraction from the earth through disposal is called life cycle analysis (LCA). When the recycling and reuse of building materials influence the design process, the circulation of materials and the role of waste products within local and regional boundaries become important considerations for architects.

The circulation of materials is considered one of the principle laws of general ecology. The principle states that

1) the rate of cycling of materials is a more important indicator in determining productivity than the amount present at any one place at any one time;
2) material cycles become more closed as a system matures (i.e., fewer materials are lost or wasted); and

3) the role of waste products in the overall health of the system increases.⁹

The practical application of this ecological theory lies within the burgeoning field of industrial ecology. According to Robert M. White in the preface of *The Greening of Industrial Ecosystems*, industrial ecology is defined as

the study of the flows of materials and energy in industrial and consumer activities, of the effects of these flows on the environment, and of the influences of economic, political, regulatory, and social factors on the flow, use, and transformation of resources.¹⁰

In *The Ecology of Commerce*, Paul Hawken incorporates the overlapping ideas of industrial ecology, life cycle analysis, pollution prevention, resource efficiency, and materials recovery into a zero-waste vision. This vision includes the reuse and recycling of building materials throughout the architecture process from design through demolition. Reuse and recycling issues are most effectively explored through an interdisciplinary and place-based style of learning. This educational resource module is both the product of and model for this approach.
Problem Statement

To address the problems of scarcity, costly extraction, and increased regulatory provisions associated with unsustainable natural resource consumption and waste disposal, architecture students need to become critical of the “upstream” and “downstream” effects of building design, construction, use, and disposal. In Kevin Lynch’s last book, Wasting Away, he wrote: “Architects must begin to think about holes in the ground and about flows of materials.” As the next generation of designers and material specifiers, architecture students need opportunities to gain an awareness of the “metabolic activity” of building components at both regional and community scales. This module seeks to validate an interdisciplinary and place-based approach to architectural education.

Methodology

The methodology for this research incorporated a cross-disciplinary literature review on waste-related issues, a place-based survey of individuals, organizations, and businesses that influence the recycling and reuse of building materials, and the design and construction of Stookey’s Plant Nursery in Moscow, Idaho, using regionally significant reused, recycled-content, and byproduct-based building materials.

As disposal fees, regulatory provisions, and natural resource extraction and refinement costs increase, numerous community and regional models for the recycling and reuse of building materials are gaining attention. A few examples include the efforts of the Center for Resourceful Building Technology in Missoula, Montana; Urban Ore, Inc., in Berkeley, California; Metro Portland Solid Waste Department and River City Resource Group in Portland, Oregon; and Turner Construction Company and Environmental Works Community Design Center in Seattle, Washington. In the spirit of Mumford’s regional survey, these models support the discussions and function as case studies throughout the learning units. The exercises following each case study evolved from streamlined “field notes” based upon my own experience. Their purpose is to guide students who wish to explore the issues of recycling and reuse within the context of their own communities.
How to Use This Educational Resource Module

This educational resource module consists of a series of discussions, case studies, and suggested “field” exercises, which encourage cross-disciplinary communication within the community and regional exploration to investigate potential barriers and workable solutions for recycling and reusing building materials. It is designed to be flexible to the needs of existing architecture seminars, lectures, and design studios, especially those that focus on materials and methods. It will be most effective as a basis for a dedicated seminar or independent study course on recycling and reuse issues that culminates in a design-build experience. Regardless of the curriculum, this module will encourage an active and participatory learning experience.

Learning Unit A, Waste Prevention, covers the broad fundamentals of resource efficiency, materials recovery, and industrial ecology. Although the connections to building and design are mentioned, this learning unit is intended to ground architecture students in the waste-related issues that effect multiple disciplines.

Learning Units B and C, Construction and Demolition Recycling and Architectural Reuse, present the fundamentals of the recycling and reuse of building materials. Job-site material recovery strategies, existing studies on the economics of job-site disposal, and architectural reuse from whole buildings to building components are some of the major topics.

Learning Unit D, Design for Materials Recovery, distills the essential design considerations for the recycling and reuse of building materials from the previous learning units. It is important that the principles of Learning Units A, B, and C are understood before beginning Learning Unit D. The focus of this learning unit is to demonstrate how a regional understanding of recycling and reuse can inform the design-build process. Stookey’s Plant Nursery in Moscow, Idaho, provides an in-depth case study of the design-build project that serves as both research tool and results for the development of this educational resource module.
Endnotes


2 Ibid, epilogue.

3 Ibid, 45.


