

Seven Years of Doing

An Architectural Field School in Galveston 2015

For seven consecutive summers UTSA Architecture students have been invited to Galveston to work collaboratively in the field with the Galveston Historical Foundation (GHF), the Island's leading architectural preservation and cultural advocacy organization. Once on the ground, students engage in documentation, research, and in the past three years, hands-on rehab construction endeavors, as collectively address an array of design and planning issues that every small city faces in order to remain relevant. The work achieved in this non-profit partnership helps to further the goals of the GHF while fostering an environment for student learning experiences that bridge the gap between the academy's emphasis on "critical thinking" and the professional workplace's demands for "practical training" in a thoughtfully balanced way.

The characterization of summer studies as a field school experience likely found its way into the parlances of architecture as borrowed from anthropology disciplines. Field observations of the folkways of aboriginal peoples, or investigations into off-the-grid archeological digs examining civilizations past, called for "field" studiousness as a prerequisite to getting to the heart of meaningful discoveries.

Differing from a time when sleeping on cots in tents and eating whatever local fair would pass for sustenance, today's architectural field school (with its modern creature comforts) enables students and their instructors to get close to subjects of importance and real-time occupants of places in ways that are generally allusive in traditional university settings. Students, having been removed from the routines of their familiar surroundings and the classroom environment of limited "contact" hours of study per week, find out quickly that a work day is actually a full day in length as an obligation to satisfying course credit content in a condensed few weeks.

What makes this year's field school particularly noteworthy is the collection of graduate students of architecture from widely diverse origins that have coincidentally chosen to study on the Island for the first five-week summer term.

Among the eight students making up this year's field school team, two of the students are from India, another hails from the top-of-the world Nepal, while one traces his roots from Russia (even as he has lived in San Antonio since he was a teenager). Closer to home another student was brought up in Mexico City before becoming a Texan, and two others grew up in island nation settings (on opposite sides of the globe), one with a Jamaica upbringing and the other from Sri Lanka.

Only one native Texan, whom proudly calls south Texas his home, completes the team of eight as he has become the field school's de-facto guide in providing his colleagues with insights regarding "Island time" mindsets and interpretations of assorted redneck-isms to both the delight and puzzlement of the exotic assemblage of cross-cultural individuals that are residing a stones-throw away from the Island's famous Seawall and beaches.

Having been divided into task teams, after introductions to the summer's projects, the students have worked cooperatively on a variety of design and planning endeavors involving existing building sites, user-occupant spatial needs, and historic resource sensitivities. In essence the four projects undertaken by the students can be described as follows:

- **East End Historic District Infill Project**

The reinvigorating of a historically designated neighborhood's integrity by designing for the reuse of four modest Arts and Crafts Era dwellings to be relocated on lots in historically compatible compositions (albeit with the houses raised to new flood insurable heights above grade) ideally situated between the downtown Strand Historic District and the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) campus. The GHF is working with the UTMB and the City's Historic Preservation Officer to bring this project to fruition and intends this project as a step to influence the rejuvenation of a neighborhood that suffered serious impacts the result of Hurricane Ike.

- **Interior Rehabilitation of 2123 Ave. K**

The development of conceptual drawings and outline specifications are being formulated for the reincarnation of a locally landmarked single family residence with actual construction activities on the property to be undertaken by UTSA architecture students during the second summer term of 2015. This design/build endeavor is being underwritten by the GHF to the advantage of availing students' valuable hands-on material assemblage experience while working with construction project managers and local sub-contractors responsible for meeting code driven incorporations of electrical, plumbing, and mechanical system updates concerning the dwelling. Proceeds of the anticipated sale of the house will be turned back into the GHF's long standing and greatly praised preservation revolving fund program.

- **Galveston History Project—Raising An Island**

Among the most unusual requests of the GHF on field school groups over the years involves this summer's initiative to research and develop a story line and digitally projected graphic sensation in fulfillment of a campaign to think anew how Galveston's history can be surveyed to visitors through more dramatic (some might even say more artistic) sensory incited means. Once computer generated visuals and sound effects are realized in support of the story, an electronically projected show about the raising of the Island (following the infamous 1900 storm) will be housed in a cavernous warehouse space as an entirely new and exciting form of GHF learning environment.

- **The Seaport Museum and the Tall Ship Elissa**

Rethinking the methods and means of interpreting the Island's maritime traditions, with the Elissa's preservation story the obvious focal point of Galveston's seafaring heritage, lead to a reimagined architectural program for conceptualizing a fresh "come here and have fun learning" identity for the Museum through playful, eye-catching esthetic expressions that insure visibility while improving on the depth of understanding concerning the City's indelible relationship to the sea.

In an effort to validate the findings and hard work of this year's field school participants, a final presentation of studio accomplishments will be made to the public at the hosting of the GHF on Tuesday June 30 beginning at 1:30 p.m. at Menard Hall located on the corner of 33rd Street and Ave. O. Interested persons are welcomed to join in viewing the achievements of the students that have been charmed by Galveston's unique heritage, its coastal allure, and above all its gracious inhabitants.

Sincerely, Rick Lewis
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