On a cold March afternoon, architect and Assistant Professor Travis Hicks walks through an empty building with interior architecture students. They’re doing what comes naturally for them – imagining the many possibilities of the space.

In the coming months, the unoccupied building on the corner of Tate and Lee Streets will become incubator space for UNCG’s Center for Community-Engaged Design. On Jan. 1, Hicks was named director.

“We’re not the first to do community-engaged design, but we are on the cutting edge,” Hicks says. “Our department has been going out in the community for 50 or 60 years now. We teach students how to apply what they learn in the classroom. As a result, our faculty and students have conducted many noteworthy projects in the community.”

Several examples come to mind, both in Greensboro and abroad. Assistant Professor Robert Charest helped create “My Sister Susan’s House,” a 4,500-square-foot home downtown for single teenage mothers and their children. As a senior, Anna Will rallied her classmates and her professor Hannah Rose Mendoza to design a school for the Kyekyewere village in Ghana, Africa.

One of the neighborhoods where faculty and students have committed most of their collaborative energy is Glenwood. Through the “Sustainable Glenwood” project, they are working to serve one of Greensboro’s oldest neighborhoods by offering affordable, innovative and sustainable preservation.

The research team is comprised of undergraduate Joy Troyer, graduate student Catherine French and Hicks, their mentor. Hicks is an expert on sustainable design. Catherine brings an emphasis on preservation. And Joy is positioned as the community liaison, involving Glenwood residents in the design process to discover their vision. The project serves as a model that could impact the future of design because it brings together all three components – preservation, sustainability and the community’s voice.

“We have to recognize as designers that we don’t have the best building healthy lives and vibrant communities

THE HOUSE WE ALL BUILT

redacted from http://newsandfeatures.uncg.edu/community-engaged-design/

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“We have to recognize as designers that we don’t have the best
ideas, people out there do,” Joy says. “Ultimately the future of design, architecture and public planning is talking to the community and asking, ‘What do you think?’”

Preservation Greensboro is a key partner in “Sustainable Glenwood.” Benjamin Briggs, executive director, says the organization looks to UNCG as an important partner in developing new initiatives in “green” practices.

Inviting ideas from the community

Even with the department’s strong history, these community-engaged projects are just the beginning. Having an official incubator space for the center will allow for even greater collaboration across the community, starting with the dedication on April 4. “We want individuals and communities across the Piedmont to share their needs so that we can make a positive impact through community-engaged design,” Hicks says. Soon, the center will begin accepting requests for proposals, particularly for renovations.

As Hicks points out, the greenest house is the one that is already built. “Renovating current structures can be one of the best solutions to energy consumption. I think these projects are the best model for our students because we’re showing them this is a valid way of working.”

Before coming to UNCG, Hicks practiced architecture and interior design for 13 years, primarily the design of massive structures up to 500,000 square feet. He came to UNCG to pursue something different.

“My background may be around big buildings,” he says. “But my passion is around reducing people’s impact on the earth.” And having greater impact on his students.

“My inspiration is to teach a new generation of designers in a way that is completely different from the way that I was taught. The smaller projects that we pursue convey a message to the students that smaller is potentially better.”

Empty homes, full of potential

Back in Glenwood, another community-engaged design project is taking shape in Hicks’ mind. How can we take “Sustainable Glenwood” a step further? He got to thinking. What if he and his students could renovate the homes in such a way that made them extremely energy efficient? What if the homes were also redesigned so that the future owners could stay in the houses for the rest of their lives – the “Aging in Place” concept?

People do not become homeless because of the rent or the mortgage alone, Hicks notes. It’s the addition of the utilities that often makes it difficult for ends to meet. Take away the high electricity bill, and you begin changing the scenario. Because it’s off the grid, the home becomes affordable – for the long term.

“If we design and renovate unoccupied homes to make them net-zero energy, what was once an empty structure can become a home for a low-income family, a home that requires...
Hicks – and his Center for Community-Engaged Design – has support for ideas like these. The City of Greensboro, Community Housing Solutions and Partners Ending Homelessness are all interested in helping. “People in Greensboro really have a heart for Glenwood,” Hicks says. “They have a heart for strong, historic neighborhoods that have a strong sense of community. My goal is always to work with the community and find out what the community envisions as the proper use and future for the houses.”

There is another advantage in this “win-win” scenario: Students are given the opportunity to design and renovate the homes. Many other university programs don’t emphasize community engagement the way UNCG does.

“Here, students learn to think about their neighbors, about the users of their designs,” he says. “We want to lead a movement that will change the face of design professionally in ways that inspire designers and builders to be more engaged.”

Hicks values the opportunity to focus on community-engaged design. “The refreshing thing about coming here to teach is that there is a lot of academic freedom for professors to carve out their niche. The high aspiration of going out and serving others has not been clearly defined as a path for design professionals until very recently,” he says. “I’ve found that path here.”

By Andrea Spencer
Contributors: Jenny Southard, Aaron Pendleton, Kimberly Broadhurst, Rachel Payne and Porsha Snowten

GLENWOOD MURAL ENGAGES COMMUNITY


In an at-risk neighborhood working toward revitalization, a creative project is combining community and design to engage residents.

A research center housed within the Department of Interior Architecture at UNCG began working with members of the Glenwood community back in January to plan a mural near the intersection of Glenwood Avenue and Grove Street that would be open to everyone in the neighborhood.

Travis Hicks, a UNCG professor and the Director of The Center for Community-Engaged Design said the research center works with neighborhoods in Greensboro on projects that incorporate social and architectural elements.

Glenwood, a neighborhood just south of UNCG’s campus and bordered by Lee Street, is one of the oldest planned communities in Greensboro, with records of the neighborhood that date back to 1906. During the 1970s and 1980s the neighborhood began to deteriorate as crime levels grew and businesses closed. Neglected buildings became canvasses for neighborhood gangs to mark their territory.

When a property owner in the neighborhood approached Hicks about a design project, the neighborhood seemed like a perfect fit for the type of work done by the CC-ED.

“We had about 120 UNCG students from art and interior architecture work on the design of it,” said Hicks. “What you see now on the wall is not what came from that initial day. There were some ideas from the community, from the Glenwood neighborhood that came out of the Christmas Bazaar back in December that students took inspiration from and then worked on those designs back in January.”

They drew inspiration as well from local students from Hope Academy who depicted their experiences of growing up in Glenwood through writing and artwork.

Anuj Patel, a recent UNCG graduate instrumental to the mural design, said that he was surprised by what the students had to say.

“Some of that stuff was actually surprisingly dark,” said Patel.

Patel wanted to be true to the experiences of the students, by incorporating aspects of drug and alcohol abuse, sexual violence and death into his mural design, but made a conscious effort to juxtapose those images with ones of childhood innocence.

Once a general design had been chosen, and supplies had been donated by Avery Dennison and Sherwin-Williams, a general layout was sketched on the wall. The design has evolved as various participants have contributed to the mural. Hicks said that this was the intention.

“The design is such that people can contribute to painting without having professional training or expertise in art or design,” said Hicks. “It’s a mural that really invites people to come in and pick up a paintbrush and contribute whether they have professional skills or no skills.”

By involving community members with the design of the mural, the hope is that the wall will become a focal point of the neighborhood that residents can be proud of. This is especially the case for some of the younger children who have helped with the design.