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EDITORIAL TEAM
“Empowerhouse”
A Multiyear, Inter-institutional Collaboration
With Community Partners

by Laura Briggs, John Clinton, Gal Gabriel, John Stinar, and Orlando Velez

Community members and partner organizations affirmed that the role of a higher education institution was indispensable in developing such an innovative approach.

AUTHORS’ NOTE: An article by two of us in the December 2012 issue of Metropolis discusses aspects of the collaboration described in this article and highlights design and technology innovations: www.metropolismag.com/pov/20121226/inter-school-collaboration.

THE SOLAR DECATHLON:
A CONTEXT FOR COLLABORATION

THREE YEARS AGO, faculty and students from Parsons The New School for Design; the Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy at The New School; and the Stevens Institute of Technology came together to form the Empowerhouse Collaborative to compete in the U.S. Department of Energy 2011 Solar Decathlon. The team organized around a goal: to change the way affordable housing is developed by building the first net-zero site home in our nation’s capital. From the start, our team sought to design a house that would be more than an exhibition piece on the National Mall. We wanted to create a house that would have a lasting impact and serve as a real-world experience for our students (see figure 1).

To achieve this goal, we realized that we needed to create an interdisciplinary team that built expertise by breaking boundaries between the disciplines. By allowing time and developing a structure for multiple types of interaction, we provided for a much deeper understanding between students. For instance, those students working on policy issues had direct access to student and faculty experts in building science, and those students working on aesthetic questions were informed by engineering issues.

Throughout the life span of the project, the team incorporated the ideas and efforts of over 200 dedicated students and faculty. The values and ideas that drove the team were woven into a wide variety of related courses with topics ranging from community engagement and advocacy to mechanical engineering, civil engineering, environmental
Throughout the process, we also extended our educational reach beyond the walls of academia by planning a series of sustainability forums and job-training workshops. These events raised awareness among local residents and built momentum for our work. In addition, Parsons hosted several Passive House Training Seminars for over 200 practitioners as part of our mission to educate the largest possible audience about the highest form of sustainable construction. These seminars were run through Parsons’ School of Constructed Environments as part of our continuing education program, and they provided us with a forum for educating our partners along with our students. What we learned from these efforts has been incorporated into a more structured and streamlined series of courses that have not ended with the completion of the house—by spring 2013 a two-family residence—but have continued into the present course structure.

Developing group cohesion and efficiency was a key part of our strategy. Early on, we examined the challenges that might arise from the size and composition of our team (e.g., logistical, managerial, financial, communications). Having identified potential organizational problems, we collectively engineered a solution under which our operations were divided among Management Committees, Design Teams, and Research Groups. Work products from the three were discussed in regularly scheduled, faculty-moderated “Design Congresses,” during which final decisions were made through a consensus model. This structure facilitated flexible thinking across the Design Teams while supporting specialized solutions that emerged from within the Research Groups. At the same time, our approach mitigated conflicts by distributing responsibilities across different organizational levels. In the end, this meant that each team member had the chance to make big contributions on some elements as well as small contributions on almost every element.

In effect, The New School and Stevens entered the 2011 competition (spanning fall 2009–fall 2011) with a set of goals that used the competition’s objectives and rules as merely a starting point for a project intended to have a wider impact than a technology demonstration. To accomplish this, sustained, multidisciplinary, inter-institutional collaboration, planning, and practice was required.

The five of us worked on this project over its life span. We are two full-time and one part-time faculty (the latter was initially a student engaged in the project) at two divisions of The New School, an alumnus (also initially a student engaged in the project and now staff at one of the partnering organizations, Habitat for Humanity), and a graduate student in environmental policy who will earn an MS in spring 2013.

A POLICY/MANAGEMENT SCHOOL IN A DESIGN COMPETITION?

The Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy was established 40 years ago to focus on New York City issues at a time when the city faced a looming financial crisis. Over time, an urban policy graduate degree program was joined by nonprofit and, later, organizational change management degree programs; recently, the school merged with the university’s graduate program in international affairs. In January 2011, a new master’s program in Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management (EPSM) was launched. The school numbers some 700 students, 36 full-time faculty, and approximately 100 part-time faculty. This compares to a Parsons student population of roughly 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

When the Parsons executive dean and faculty of the university’s renowned design school decided to submit an entry in the U.S. Department of Energy Solar Decathlon,
they were determined to develop a project that would extend beyond the design and technology expectations of the competition to seek a broader impact. At the early stages of planning the Decathlon entry, prior collaboration by the two of us who are full-time faculty—one at the Parsons design school and the other at the Milano public policy school—provided a connection that would prove to be important in making an inter-divisional approach feasible. Through a university faculty senate task force on sustainable and socially responsible design and construction (established as the university developed plans for a signature University Center facility), we had developed common experience focused on issues relevant to energy, design, management, policy, and our urban campus community neighbors. This prior relationship helped provide the shared experience and trust that are essential to sustained, effective collaboration, especially across disciplines and professions.

At the same time that Parsons began to plan an entry in the Solar Decathlon, Milano was launching the new master’s degree in Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management (EPSM) mentioned previously. The Decathlon project provided an exceptionally ambitious and visible opportunity to heighten awareness for the new degree program from the outset and offered prospective students a distinctive practicum-based educational experience—very much in the tradition of university founder John Dewey. This conjunction soon served (once the EPSM program launched) as a mechanism to draw into the project Milano students with especially suitable experiences, competencies, and interests (their numbers included several with academic and/or practice backgrounds in architecture, “green” housing, and related fields).

That said, the Milano School faced several challenges that differed from those faced by Parsons, both at the outset and on an ongoing basis. First, whereas Parsons was committed to the project through various memoranda of understanding, Milano’s role was never formalized in such fashion. While this circumstance permitted Milano flexibility in its level of involvement, the school’s ability to contribute meaningfully was entirely dependent upon inducing the participation of faculty with diverse competencies—and few obvious incentives—to set aside routine competing responsibilities in order to engage in a fast-moving, rigorous, highly specified competition that would comprise—almost exclusively—design and engineering programs and not public policy/management schools.

As well, as the goal of influencing housing rather than merely designing and building an energy-efficient house emerged, it became evident that attaining it would require the extensive participation of multiple disciplines and professional practice areas. A number of these were located within the Milano School. In fall 2010, faculty and students from the Organizational Change Management (OCM) program were engaged through a class project to conduct an assessment of the group process challenges of such a complex, multiyear, inter-institutional project. The initial OCM team’s recommendations in turn informed the work of a spring 2011 OCM class that actually developed the relevant group process interventions as the project increased in scale and diversity of disciplines and professions. Simultaneously, throughout the 2010–2011 academic year, students in several Nonprofit Management (NPM) program classes on various aspects of fund-raising and grant writing undertook funding research and proposal writing to support the project’s financial requirements of roughly $1.5 million.

By fall 2011, a Milano class, Sustainable Urban Communities, was created, dedicated to Milano School participation in the Solar Decathlon, while additional Milano classes were identified as potential contributors to the array of project goals.

The Sustainable Urban Communities class was initially designed to draw students from multiple Milano programs who would then form teams focused on those aspects of the Empowerhouse project most clearly aligned with their own educational interests and competencies. In addition to several OCM and NPM students who continued the work of their predecessors, students from the newly launched EPSM program brought to the class an orientation toward those dimensions of the project that would involve interactions
with such entities as the DC Department of the Environment, the District Department of Housing and Community Development, and the Enterprise Community Partners Green Cities Initiative. At the same time, teams of students in policy and management, working with engineering and architecture students, developed and expanded relationships with such vital partners as Habitat for Humanity of Washington, DC, the relevant Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner, grassroots organizers, and community-based organizations, including the several churches in the surrounding blocks.

As we advanced the goal of influencing affordable housing, financial analysis played an increasingly important role in the project. A Milano School faculty member who took an early and sustained interest in the project invited members of his finance class to conduct a project that would illustrate for a homeowner—and also for a prospective housing developer—the amortization of up-front costs for the house given its Passive House technology and other relevant features. This project demonstrated that the initial investment could be recouped in about seven years. As well, students enrolled in the yearlong course offered by the Milano School Community Development Finance Lab undertook a project that demonstrated to Habitat for Humanity of Washington, DC, the possibility of altering its business model to incorporate Passive House technology. This work was so successful that by 2012 DC Habitat broke ground on six more Passive House projects and by 2013 was exploring the possibility of applying Passive House technology to scores of new construction projects.

For the Milano School, the project provided a model for developing a curriculum-based approach to inter-divisional collaboration that develops field/experiential learning experience informed by relevant theoretical frameworks in collaboration, partnership, and the pertinent field application (government/community relations, finance, group process). This model now serves collaborative projects by Parsons and Milano students working with Habitat for Humanity of Philadelphia to design a six-to-seven unit Passive House residential project with the key goals of community involvement and impact. As well, the Milano Sustainable Urban Communities course (discussed in greater detail in the next section) was adapted to accommodate other team projects such as the delivery of short courses on sustainability in the Union Square (New York City) farmer’s market in partnership with GrowNYC/Greenmarket (which administers more than 50 New York City farmers’ markets) and two projects addressing the impact of Hurricane Sandy in the New York City communities of Breezy Point, Queens, and Red Hook, Brooklyn. Both of these communities were severely impacted by the storm, and Milano students are conducting needs assessments to determine the best fit between stakeholder goals and New School capacity—with the understanding that student and faculty colleagues in multiple programs and divisions will likely undertake aspects of this work over the span of successive semesters. Given their previous shared experience, over the coming semesters these projects may very well involve design students, environmental studies faculty, and participants from other university departments and programs.

“PASSING THE BATON”: CONTINUITY ACROSS SEMESTERS THROUGH A PRACTICUM COURSE

The Sustainable Urban Communities course was created to allow Milano School urban policy and management students to participate in the larger Solar Decathlon project. The course, which was conceived as a practicum, offered a place for students to bridge theory and practice. Students engaged in projects that spanned the course of the Empowerhouse project, over three years from conception to completion. Primarily, Sustainable Urban Communities served as a link to community stakeholders; students in the course worked on projects that extended well beyond the scope of the competition, such as creating a homeowner’s manual, assisting a start-up solar cooperative, and linking with several community-based organizations. The guiding text for the course provided students with the theoretical structure to frame their involvement through the concept of transorganizational systems.
Because the competition and construction of the Empowerhouse spanned many academic semesters, project leadership and faculty had to contend with the systematic turnover of students from one semester to the next. The challenge of starting each semester with a new set of students required the rapid transfer of knowledge from the previous cohort to the succeeding one. An additional challenge resulted from the need to excite students with the opportunity to be creative in the space while at the same time respecting and integrating the work of the previous semester.

In addition to bridging the gap from semester to semester, the course had to reconcile differences between the schools within the university and beyond. Students in the Architecture program attended two studio sessions over the course of the week that were each six hours in length. Conversely, Milano students had only a single hour and forty-five minute class meeting weekly. The speed at which each group was able to work on the project varied greatly, yet the desire to foster collaboration between the schools, with the Stevens Institute, and with the many community and government partners was an educational priority.

Despite the challenges inherent in dealing with student turnover and working across multiple schools and universities, it was important to keep talented and engaged students involved beyond the duration of any single semester of the Sustainable Urban Communities course. The tacit project knowledge retained by these students and, more importantly, the working relationships they developed with stakeholders could not be transferred from semester to semester in a document. The creative use of mechanisms within the existing academic system helped make possible their continued involvement in the project.

**SEMESTER TO SEMESTER: THE NEED FOR RAPID KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER BALANCED WITH ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY**

The initial assignment for the course was broken into two segments. The first was an analysis of the project background, which would provide a narrative of the current state of the work. The second asked students to outline the scope of their involvement over the course of the semester, including

» Overall project objectives
» Semester deliverables
» Boundaries of the project team
» Support needs
» Team member roles
» Time schedule

The production of the assigned document required students to understand the work of previous student project teams, interview stakeholders, and research the organizations involved. Simultaneously, each team engaged in the planning process and contracted their involvement for the semester. Sections of the document were shared with stakeholders as an ongoing process in order to confirm overall objectives and ensure that semester deliverables were in line with stakeholder expectations.

At the conclusion of the first Sustainable Urban Communities course, students were asked to draft a transition document that would inform the next group’s work. Organizational Change Management students offered a template that proved useful over the course of the project. The template was not an all-encompassing document, as a rigid template could not capture the unique elements of each project. However, it gathered critical information through the use of suggested fields in a memorandum that would be conveyed to each succeeding semester’s class, including

» What is the project? Why did you decide to do it?
» Who was involved (both internal and external contacts)?
» Do you recommend continuing this work? Why or why not?
» What insights or tips can you pass on?
Where are documents or resources relating to this project? (Be specific.)

Any additional notes?

While the transition document evolved from semester to semester, the expectation that each group would make a recommendation to continue or stop the project became a fixture in the process. The recommendation empowered students at both the semester’s inception and its culmination. Since the project was the focus of the coursework, each student was responsible for choosing a project for the duration of the semester, and—in accordance with a key requirement of the Department of Energy competition—students continued to take “ownership” of their project. Equally, as the teams prepared to hand off their work, they used the recommendation as a means of enticing future teams to take hold of their project.

As noted previously, numerous faculty and staff members and over 200 New School and Stevens Institute students were involved in the Empowerhouse project from conception, to competition, and through construction (see figure 2 for a project time line). In the fall of 2009, while Parsons began to develop a variety of related design courses but a year before a dedicated Milano course was in place, students from the Milano and Parsons schools shared a course that produced the official competition proposal for the 2011 Solar Decathlon (in conjunction with Stevens). In the semesters that followed, courses continued to be aligned with the project; however, the courses were housed in each school and students did not register outside of their respective programs. To bridge the gap between disciplines, a series of integration sessions was conceived after the first semester. The sessions were scheduled during the architecture studio with an agenda comprised of information sharing and joint decision making.

**Figure 2 Empowerhouse Project Time Line**
Once Milano developed its Sustainable Urban Communities course, it included in the syllabus readings that provided Policy and Management students with an introduction to some of the creative processes employed by Architecture students. In the meantime, charrettes were often used as a means for visually relaying ideas within the studio. Small groups would explore an idea and draw concepts on a long, narrow sheet of trace paper. Once these were attached to the wall, the larger group would discuss each team’s approach to the problem. Charrettes were also used outside the class environment and were often used in collaborative community planning. Introducing the charrette process through supplemental readings provided Policy and Management students with the vocabulary needed to engage in the creative process.

**ADDITIONAL TECHNIQUES FOR MAINTAINING STUDENT INVOLVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT**

Retaining student talent throughout the life cycle of the project was essential in providing continuity from semester to semester and creating further learning and practice opportunities for students. Mechanisms for continued involvement already existed within the university; three used in the project were graduate teaching assistantships, research assistantships, and independent study courses.

Graduate assistant and research assistant positions were useful in relaying tacit knowledge from one semester to the next. Each semester’s course involved multiple projects, and these student leaders were needed to provide background information and steward new student groups early in the semester. Each semester, students were jumping onto a “moving train” that continued to gain speed as the project neared its competition. Transition documents, presentations, blog posts, media coverage, and interactions with continuing students and key faculty were used each time the course turned over to serve as the information base for those entering the project.

Independent study courses, along with other university programs, offered a means for students to explore their own interests supported by the greater Empowerhouse project. In the later stages, as the house was moved from the Mall following the competition and reconstructed as a duplex residence in the Deanwood neighborhood, the ability to monitor energy consumption and interior comfort (for example, humidity and temperature) presented an appealing project to many students. The effect these data would have on the behavior of future homeowners was especially interesting to Policy and Management students. In a parallel and useful track, the university sponsored grants to improve its own energy efficiency. A process being piloted in a dormitory, providing energy-use information to students, bridged the school’s internal efforts and the project. Leveraging the applied learning between the Empowerhouse and other university projects allowed students to study a focused problem, provided a great return, and was made possible by using mechanisms within the university to keep students involved across the project.

**INTERDISCIPLINARY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: REAL-WORLD CONSTRAINTS AND LARGE-GROUP PROCESSES**

Collaboration was at the heart of our affordable sustainability mission. Our cross-disciplinary approach enabled us to create and carry out an inclusive project. The integration between design and public engagement, along with a hands-on academic approach, augmented our enterprise with real-life perspective and dynamics. These elements enriched our project through connection with an actual community and its cultural context, enabled vital external partnerships, and facilitated comprehensive resolutions.

Our cross-disciplinary work became more productive and rewarding due to The New School’s adaptable academic framework. This framework enabled students from many classes to take part in the project. Also, students were able to bolster their leadership skills and personal achievements by extending course engagements to project-related extracurricular assignments. This allowed for longer
participation and a higher level of commitment. (These personal opportunities expanded the dimensions of our collective work and allowed more students to interact across disciplines.)

Yet, cross-disciplinary collaboration in this large-scale project was a challenge. Foremost, it was essential to develop an effective work environment in order to be able to reach our collective goals. However, our work environment changed over the course of the project according to the group’s size, composition, and level of commitment. We therefore developed a series of mechanisms at different phases of the project to facilitate the group decision-making processes and coordinate the many deliverables. The project began with 25 students with experience in a wide range of disciplines. This group was divided into five research subgroups that were composed of students with similar professional backgrounds and skill sets. These groups met together for design charrettes focused on developing clear objectives for the project planning and design phases. However, when the work advanced from preliminary research to project development, the group was re-divided into cross-disciplinary subgroups that would carry out the design. This small-group interdisciplinary work enabled us to develop cross-domain collaboration and communication skills around specific deliverables. Sustaining effective communication was vital at advanced stages of the project, when numerous associated tasks were performed simultaneously. We held weekly Design Congress meetings to inform, stay informed, and coordinate decisions toward critical deadlines. In those meetings, each of the seven design groups (earth, flow, media, power, space, wrapper, and sponsorship) presented progress reports and recommendations for driving the process forward. These 10-minute presentations ended with the full group of about 50 students in the room, voting on key elements. From time to time, a vote had to be postponed until a related key element in the project became clearer.

The interdisciplinary challenge required us to resolve barriers to communication by bridging professional languages and styles. One example was in our conversations with the community: Community Development students needed to render legible technological descriptions that would convey the project to the community. They also had to provide the designers and engineers in the larger team with feedback on the community’s reflections and concerns. This process became vital in making the homeowner’s manual (which would assist the resident family on moving into the Empowerhouse) simple, user friendly, and useful. At early phases of the project, community meetings enriched our understanding of our goals and the project’s narrative. For example, one of our preliminary objectives was to create opportunities for the future homeowners to grow produce in a roof garden. We hoped that this would lead to a community interest in urban farming. After a dialogue with the community about this strategy, we learned that in fact many community members had homesite urban garden experience. Consequently, the objective of advocating urban farming became less central. Through a partnership with a local organization, a community garden project was born.

The interdisciplinary challenge required us to resolve barriers to communication by bridging professional languages and styles.

**The Importance of Cross-Disciplinary Conversations to the Advancement of the Project’s Social Affordability Mission**

Our comprehensive financial analysis became a vital piece in advancing the project’s social and affordability mission. It helped us stimulate a conversation with Habitat for Humanity of Washington, DC, about the feasibility of applying our design principles to future projects. It also helped us demonstrate our project’s marketability and our conclusion that sustainable and affordable housing can be complementary. Our target audience was diverse. It included our partners, the local community, residential developers, and policy makers.

One of us, an architect completing a master’s degree in Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management, took a bridging role in planning and conducting the financial feasibility analysis. Building on the work that was
introduced to students in a finance class, this individual worked with the design team (architects and engineers) on various assignments in preparation for a net present value (NPV) analysis. For example, we summarized the budget and construction costs and compared them with Habitat’s typical costs. This enabled us to clarify the project’s up-front incremental construction cost. We also analyzed projected savings from lower utility bills. These assignments required considerable coordination and a detailed understanding of the design. This work also leaned on dialogues with both Habitat for Humanity (to learn about its typical construction methods and models) and the Deanwood community (to learn about typical energy costs for similarly sized homes in the neighborhood). When the finance team joined the work, bridging was required to convey to the team the project’s design principles so that the NPV analysis framework could be applied. The finance language added new dimensions to our project’s scope. We looked at various scenarios for energy consumption levels and mortgage interest rates to show that Passive House construction is not only prudent for the low-income residential market, but can also be a wise investment in market-rate construction.

**A DEDICATED OPERATIONS FUNCTION**

One of us, at the time a Milano School Urban Policy student (trained as an architect), served as Operations Director for the project. A key function of this role was to successfully liaise with decision makers and convince them of the merits of adapting institutional policies to accommodate the Empowerhouse project. To keep the project running smoothly, it was critical for the Operations Team to understand three basic things. First, what university policies would have the potential to stall the project? Second, who were the people upholding those policies and how could they be persuaded to adapt them to the needs of Empowerhouse? And finally—how to write thank-you notes!

A key component of running a successful project is understanding what, and who has the potential to stall it. When working through established policies, it is strategically important to understand the rebuttal. Planning was necessary to stay one step ahead of policies that would prohibit actions critical to the project. Thus, when the time came to implement the action, the Operations Team knew how to move decisions through the system.

Operations as a disciplined function took on the shape and form of understanding simple politics. The Operations Team always made an effort to ensure that people at all levels of the project felt important and respected at all times. At the university, work with multiple departments at various levels was necessary to keep the project running. It was critical to make sure that relationships were never broken. In addition to our complying with departmental policies, selling the project ideas and goals to the individuals in each department helped to bring them onto our team and to create unity. So, when a policy needed to be amended or adjusted, we already had a relationship with someone inside the key department. Thus, at the time when their help was needed most, our allies did whatever it took to keep the project going, while at the same time respecting written policies.

The Empowerhouse project served for us as an example of the benefits of critical pedagogy—how a student-run project can be taken from the classroom and transferred to the real world. When Empowerhouse was completed on December 4, 2012, a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrated the accomplishment. Three years in the making, the Empowerhouse project was unique in that it was a reflection of the ambition and drive of hundreds of people who made diverse contributions that collectively achieved what none of the players could hope to accomplish in isolation. And all the parties never lost sight of the project’s overarching goal: to make the house a home.

**CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY**

It is important to note the many dimensions of this project that go unrelated here, including the engineering challenges confronted by Stevens students and their groundbreaking solutions; the challenge of maintaining a project over several
years at a distance of hundreds of miles—the separation between New York/Hoboken, NJ, and Washington, DC; the student immersion in Deanwood community issues thanks to the generous time commitments of neighborhood leaders and organizations; the interactions with DC government agencies for housing, environment, and transportation; the efforts to foster national visibility for Passive House technology and the Empowerhouse design through such venues as national homebuilders’ conferences; and many more.

Balancing the competing interests of the competition and the larger goals of the project sometimes posed seemingly intractable conflicts, but in most cases these became, instead, opportunities to devise innovative solutions.

Unquestionably, the commitment of divisional administrative leadership to the project provided a green light on many occasions when barriers arose. A prior history of highly successful collaboration between Parsons and Milano served as a demonstration that such joint work could produce exceptional results. Sufficient differentiation among engineering, design, and management/policy students provided each group a space for the application of expertise, while at the same time the synergistic result of their combined efforts became visible as the house took shape, systems performed, and community members and partner organizations affirmed that the role of a higher education institution was indispensable in developing such an innovative approach. As one government agency staffer observed, referring to interactions with counterparts at another agency, “We never really talked to them about these issues until you students brought us together.” As the Empowerhouse model drives a similar project in Philadelphia, we are hopeful that the lessons of broad collaboration will be replicable and will continue to contribute to changing the idea of what affordable housing can be.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

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