Better Clients By-Design: Teaching design in a real estate development context

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Professional context that is still debating its value.

Interest in design among real estate development students is increasing, but few models exist for effective design teaching in a real estate development context. Most academic real estate programs’ design offerings are limited, if design is taught at all, typically including architectural history, building typologies or urban analysis, courses that encourage students to view design from a critical distance rather than engage in the design process itself. Designing Livable Communities, the required design course in USC’s new Bachelors of Real Estate Development program, takes the opposite approach, immersing students in a studio-like design experience that encourages them to “think in situations,” rather than in the abstract. In the two years that the course has been taught in this format, students have exceeded both their own, and their instructors, expectations, proving to be more creative, spatial and detail-oriented than conventional wisdom would have us imagine.

Key to the success of the course is a semester-long medium-scale infill real estate development project which requires students to take on both the developer/client and designer/consultant roles. Working individually yet collaboratively, students propose the
program and project vision for one site, and design to another student’s proposal on a second site. Class sessions are conducted as project meetings where classmates present design schemes to their “clients,” documented via plans, sections, diagrams and massing models, and constructively critique the schemes prepared for them by their “designers” in both verbal and written formats. This first-hand engagement cultivates the confidence and skills required to evaluate substantive design issues and concepts, but also engenders a deeper understanding and respect for the field of design itself. All of which will hopefully create better future clients, those who partner with designers to expand and amplify, not merely translate, their real estate development vision.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Liz Falletta teaches architectural and urban design at USC’s Price School of Public Policy. She has over fifteen years of experience teaching design across disciplines at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Her courses focus on design as an interdisciplinary activity and explore how the intersecting values of architecture, planning and development can inform the design process and improve design outcomes. Her interdisciplinary housing reference text, By-Right | By-Design, Housing Development vs. Housing Design in Los Angeles, is forthcoming from Routledge in summer 2019. In addition to teaching full time, Ms. Falletta is principal of Falletta Development, which developed one of the first small lot subdivisions in Los Angeles. Liz is a licensed architect and holds a BA in Architecture from Washington University in St. Louis, an MArch from SCI-Arc and an MRED from USC.

In recognition of the breadth of her expertise, Liz was appointed to the City of Los Angeles’ Zoning Advisory Committee (ZAC) in 2013. This 21-member group is the first line of critique for the city’s re:Code LA project, a $5 million dollar, five year plan to overhaul the zoning code. Ms. Falletta is also a member of the California Planning Roundtable.