

2014 Engagement Incentive Grant Request



Small Town Studio: The Eureka Springs Park Project

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Project Description

For almost two years, the Small Town Studio has collaborated with the town of Eureka, Kansas to develop proposals and strategies to address the rural blight that has affected the town. The work has strong benefits for all concerned. Architecture students are able to study and design in a real context, sharpening their skills at interfacing with clients and the public, pre-design activities such as project formulation, and logistical concerns such as project implementation and management. These are all highly valuable traits in emerging professionals. Eureka receives close design and research services as well as real outcomes including economic development and realized designs. A third group, practicing professionals, receives fees associated with projects moving forward into production, and ensures high-quality built design for the town.

The next phase in the Studio's work in Eureka will involve the design and construction of a public pavilion in Eureka Springs Park. The park, located on River Street and a block east of Main Street, is in many ways the heart of the town. As the story goes, the founding group of settlers discovered a spring seeping out of the bank of a small tributary to the Fall River, and exclaimed "Eureka!" at once establishing and naming the town.

Today the park is little more than an open field interrupted by the seasonal creek and a superfluous dirt alley. The alley separates the seldom-used field from the commemorative plaque marking the spot of the spring. In the summer of 2013, a clean-up initiative restored the park somewhat, though at present no new interpretive or recreational interventions have been installed (see <http://eurekaproject.org/>).

This grant seeks funding to aid in the design and implementation of improvements to the park including a pavilion and related landscaping work for the Eureka Springs Park. The project has been adopted by community stakeholders as an important feature that responds to a number of goals towards the improvement of Eureka.

Scope

Since its inception, the Small Town Studio has provided design services to six Kansas communities, including Cuba, Pittsburg and Colby. Jamestown and Blue Rapids are under study this academic year. The Studio has partnered most prominently with the city of Eureka, where more than a dozen projects have been pursued, and the engaged partnership with this community is the focus of this submission.

The scope of this submittal is the collaboratively-based design and construction of improvements to Eureka Springs Park. Both aspects of the project will be performed in a closely engaged manner with community stakeholders and professional designers and builders. An additional component of the project will be evaluation and oversight, with the ultimate goal of crafting a rapid response model that can be replicated in other places.

Eureka Springs Park Project Partners

A tripartite partnership was conceived to achieve success for the project, based on the pragmatic notion of utilizing the strengths of various agents. K-State, for example, is a good resource for research, where students can apply focused study under faculty guidance; community partners act as clients, and provide a currency of knowledge and nuance that cannot be found in data; and professional partners are poised to execute plans. This model utilizes each type of organization to the best of its abilities and simultaneously maximizes benefits. It is hoped that the public-private-institution model promulgated in the Eureka Project will be replicable and can be applied to other Kansas municipalities.

Institution

The project will be led by faculty from the **Department of Architecture**. Faculty from **Landscape Architecture and Regional and Community Planning** will be project reviewers. Experts in stream reclamation and naturalized Kansas plantings from across campus will also be consulted.

Community

Two institutions in particular will be utilized in the prosecution of the project. The **Rural Design Mob** has been instrumental in forwarding the Eureka Springs Park in the community, and they will be key in guiding and aiding student efforts in terms of developing community consensus and understanding issues related to site and context. The Mob has already assembled a team of stakeholders for the project, which will help to ratify student design ideas.

The **Eureka Studio**, the community development arm of the **Eureka Foundation**, will be instrumental in forwarding the project. Some funding will be available from this agency, and it will also provide space and coordination assistance, and help secure material, labor, and equipment donations. The development of the Eureka Springs Park has been named as a priority by these organizations.

Finally, the **City Administrator** Ian Martell will be the liaison with the Small Town Studio and local governmental agencies. Mr. Martell sits on the Advisory Board of the Eureka Studio and is aware of the proposed project.

Profession

Lester Limon of PKHLS Architecture from El Dorado and Newton, Kansas will provide criticism of student designs and will provide leadership for the implementation of the pavilion and other amenities. Local contractors will also be important partners. The **Westar Green Team**, an office that donates and helps construct pavilions using reclaimed utility lumber and hardware, will play an instrumental role in this first project and will likely be a partner in future projects. The Small Town Studio is currently working with both these groups.

Impact

There will be both short and long term benefits of this effort. Short term benefits include a highly engaged design process, which is of particular benefit to students, asking them to couch design ideas within the context and community of Eureka, which will have a dynamic role in design development. The focused attention and activity in Eureka Springs Park will engage the town in a very specific manner, at a different scale and type of interaction than the visualization projects the Small Town Studio has engaged in to date. Of course, the biggest short term goal is the improvements to the park itself, which addresses two established priorities of town stakeholders – the addition of new amenities for citizens, and a new attraction for folks passing through town, at once contributing to the beautification of River Street and giving transient motorists a reason to stop.

Long term, the project will be utilized as a “rapid response” model for future work in other small towns across Kansas. The notion behind this is that a small, quickly built project has the potential to jump-start collaboration between the town and the Small Town Studio, concretizing relationships between stakeholder groups. And an early success can galvanize a town, making positive change seem more possible. This prototype rapid response project will be studied during the planning and implementation phases, with an eye towards making the process replicable for other communities.

Benchmarks

Three metrics will be evaluated during the project: **Quality of Engagement, Logistical Expediency, and Effectiveness**. How well do the efforts of the Small Town Studio and its partners address the needs and priorities of the community stakeholders? Ideally, student efforts will be not only informed by Eureka, but will be

performed in tandem with community members. Best practices in community-engaged design will be studied and utilized during the project. The expediency of the project will be paramount if it is to be a replicable model. As with other projects, approaching the design and construction of the project utilizing the strengths of the various stakeholders will be important. Lessons learned from the various activities associated with design and construction will be of great value for future projects. Finally, the end result will be evaluated in terms of effectiveness. Does the built project meet its stated objectives? Will the amenities be utilized? Are there social or economic benefits to the project? Understanding these implications of the improved Eureka Springs Park in terms of community development will be of great academic and practical interest.

Timeline

Summer 2014. Framework for collaboration finalized. Logistical issues, as much as possible, to be addressed in advance of student participation. Benchmarking procedure begins with a community-focused pre-project survey regarding current Eureka Springs Park. A corollary survey will be developed for design students.

August-September 2014. Student and community collaboratively devise programmed features for the park. Pre-project survey disseminated to involved community members.

September-October 2014. Design charettes held for park. Design activities to be informed by academic and professional expertise and ratified by stakeholders.

October-December 2014. Project is vetted by professional consultants, materials secured, and construction schedule developed.

January-April 2015. Project constructed. After-construction survey disseminated to design students involved.

Summer 2015. Post-project evaluation summit held with all major participants, for the purpose of precipitating best practices for future projects. All aspect of the project will be examined, from early engagement measures to project implementation.

Fall 2015. After project has been installed for six months, a follow-up survey with Eureka and professional stakeholders will be conducted. The survey will attempt to isolate the effect of the new construction on community economic and cultural issues.

Conclusion

Examining this prototypical project will be an important step towards formalizing a specific model of engaged intervention. The model will certainly have application in other contexts, and will allow the Small Town Studio to better operationalize its ability to respond to a wide range of rural communities. Evidence drawn from the study will be eminently publishable in both disciplinary and pedagogical engagement venues.