***How do you build a practice that engages community?***

My mentor and I discussed the question, *how do you build a practice that engages community.* We looked at this prompt from two different angles. The first being from the standpoint of architecture practice – how does a firm engage with the community during design? The second being from a standpoint of the firm – how does a firm organize community engagement opportunities for its employees? Both ideas are important to me with regards to how I will shape my future career.

How a firm engages with the community during a project is imperative to not only the design, but also the acceptance and value of the project. My mentor used one of her past courthouse projects as an example. The site was at the end of a long row of older courthouses, one being build every few years. Her firm was to design another, more modern courthouse, at the end of the row. Directly adjacent to the block was a residential area with small townhouses. Her firm looked at how people moved around the area and what type of public space was needed. How did the neighborhood engage with the row of courthouses, if they did so at all? After speaking to the residents and broadening the scope of work, they were able to move a vacant nearby chapel next to their new courthouse. The chapel became a library for law and acted as a buffer between the grand courthouses and the residential area. By looking at the current conditions and community culture, they were able to design the site in a way that would engage the neighborhood and offer more public space. This is one aspect within architecture that I really appreciate and plan to build my career around. As my mentor put it, architecture is designing a usable space by coordinating solutions. However, in order to coordinate those solutions, the architect/firm must approach the project in a holistic way. Listening to the client to understand what they need versus what they want, reaching out to the community, and understanding the context are all important elements of design. Architecture is really about the user and the community in which it is integrated.

The other aspect to this prompt can be seen when looking internally at a firm. How does the firm go out into its local community? My mentor and I talked about the importance of coworkers volunteering together outside of the office. Novus has a “fun committee” that organizes events such as Habitat for Humanity build days, trips to local schools to teach them about design and architecture, and delivering presents for foster children. These types of activities are not only good for the community, but they also help encourage a positive collaboration among coworkers. Additionally, volunteering is a great way to market a firm. Although I sometimes wonder if firms plan community engagement activities for marketing purposes more than purity of heart, I still believe it is a great practice. Volunteering has a positive influence on a person which can translate into his/her work through creativity, production, and enjoyment of work. Spending time outside of work with coworkers can also help the collaborative environment within the office. Most firms I have worked for thus far have all had some sort of outreach or engagement opportunities to get employees out of the office and interacting with the local community. I have always felt happier and more involved after participating in these events. Therefore, I plan to make this aspect of community engagement an imperative part of my career.

As a student studying architecture, I love that I can work with others and understand how I can best help someone. Creating useable space that helps people work, practice, and play, is something really I value in this profession. I plan to build my career around community engagement so that I will be a servant to the public in practice and in character.