

Experience Design Graduate Studio Partners with LivableStreets Alliance & Community to Develop Design Proposals for Boston's Columbia Road



Student Work Snapshot. Project by Jeremy Brodeur, Estefania Ciliotta, and Sylvia Zepeda.

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The real-life impact of the student work created in last fall's Experience Design graduate studio will be long-lasting. Grounded in a community partnership with [LivableStreets](#)

[Alliance](#), CAMD's Experience Design graduate studio, led by Professor Kristian Kloeckl, explored the urban street as a context of investigating research and design methods. The Experience Design graduate students focused specifically on Boston's Columbia Road, which runs through a series of diverse neighborhoods and communities and connects Franklin Park and Joe Moakley Park, as well as the Waterfront in South Boston. While this 2.3-mile road fulfills essential urban connections, it also points to a lack in the network of urban spaces, representing crucial opportunities for change. The street is considered a priority project for the City of Boston and part of the early action group in Boston's 2030 plan, making it an interesting, relevant, and critically important subject of study and innovation in the experience design space.

The semester-long exploration started with examining street experiences generally, which are complex but often overlooked. The students began with an exploration of personal street experiences – focusing on the five basic human senses – and determining what qualities made these experiences memorable.

“Streets are public land, and the diverse interactions that occur on them are open to everyone but experienced in unique and personal ways,” explained [Professor Kloeckl](#). “The significance of streets in our daily lives is often overlooked but it is really those places that pull together people's everyday experiences when you think of it. They are the connective tissue between people's varied activities such as work, play, learning, socializing, leisure, and of course, home. The experience of streets is between all of these and they also evolve continuously in reflection and anticipation of changes underway at all levels in their urban context.”

Streets are public land, and the diverse interactions that occur on them are experienced universally by all. They attract locals and visitors to spend time for a variety of activities related to work, play, learning, socializing, leisure, and more, and they must continuously evolve in reflection and anticipation of changes underway at all levels in their urban context.

Like many places in Boston, Columbia Road is at the center of various communities that are rapidly changing and growing, and the major roadway must strive to support and propel the momentum, not work against it. To that end, students investigated people's

experiences along that street and identified opportunities to enrich them by developing proposals for design interventions.



Snapshot of Project by Lauren McMullen and Erin Brenneman.

“This class was my first introduction to ethnography, and it was a semester of beginning to see the world as a researcher,” explained **Lauren McMullen**, graduate student (Master of Science, Experience Design). “Our readings unwrapped urban planning concepts, and cemented an understanding of a city as a living archive; spaces took on the depth of time as we explored and made sense of how a place is created. The class helped me to come outside of my own perspective to see a place for its form, its

function, and its influence on the five senses.” Lauren and her team’s project can be found [here](#).

This ability to step outside one’s own perspective to understand, more broadly, human goals, needs, and desires is at the core of experience design. In a similar vein, student **Lun Zhou** (Master of Science, Experience Design) describes the studio as “a holistic design approach that studies the human experience in a specific environment in order to improve its quality and to understand human attention, goals, needs, and aspirations.”

Helpful in this process of studying and understanding the human experience during this particular Experience Design graduate studio were site visits and conversations with members of the local communities.

“This studio course brought me into the field and taught me to consider the world that I’ve only seen through my own eyes from the perspectives of residents, bus drivers, government workers, schools, and other parties who interact, sometimes invisibly, to define a complicated system,” added graduate student **Colin Gerrity** (Master of Science, Experience Design), who comes from a design background of engineering. “I learned quickly that anything you may identify as a problem doesn’t have a straightforward solution as in engineering, requiring careful attention to be paid to the potential consequences of a design for all stakeholders, but to not let those consequences constrain the creative process. This course and program is comprised of students from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, all of whom bring something unique to the conversation and continue to challenge me to view design through new lenses.” Colin’s project can be found [here](#).

ROAD CROSSING

Break down the barrier of Blue Hill Avenue and connect Columbia Rd with Franklin Park Zoo

Design Part:

1 Parklets and Open Kitchen Restaurant

Build a welcome environment in the corner, let people who walk here or drive here to realize that they are entering a new place. People can eat, chat and meet friends in this semi-enclosed space.

References:



4 An Open-air Pavilion to Franklin Park Zoo

Build an information hub to introduce the zoo history, broadcast recent events, and let local bus commuters to stop and wait.

Zoo Information: Introduction of Franklin Park Zoo, Zoo map, Open hours, Recent events, education program...
Others: Weather, Community activities, MBTA bus lines...

References:

Pavilion of Boston Harbor Islands



1 Crosswalk

Use graphic to lead pedestrian's flow, slow down traffic speeds. Use green color to express the feeling of the expansion of Franklin Park Zoo.

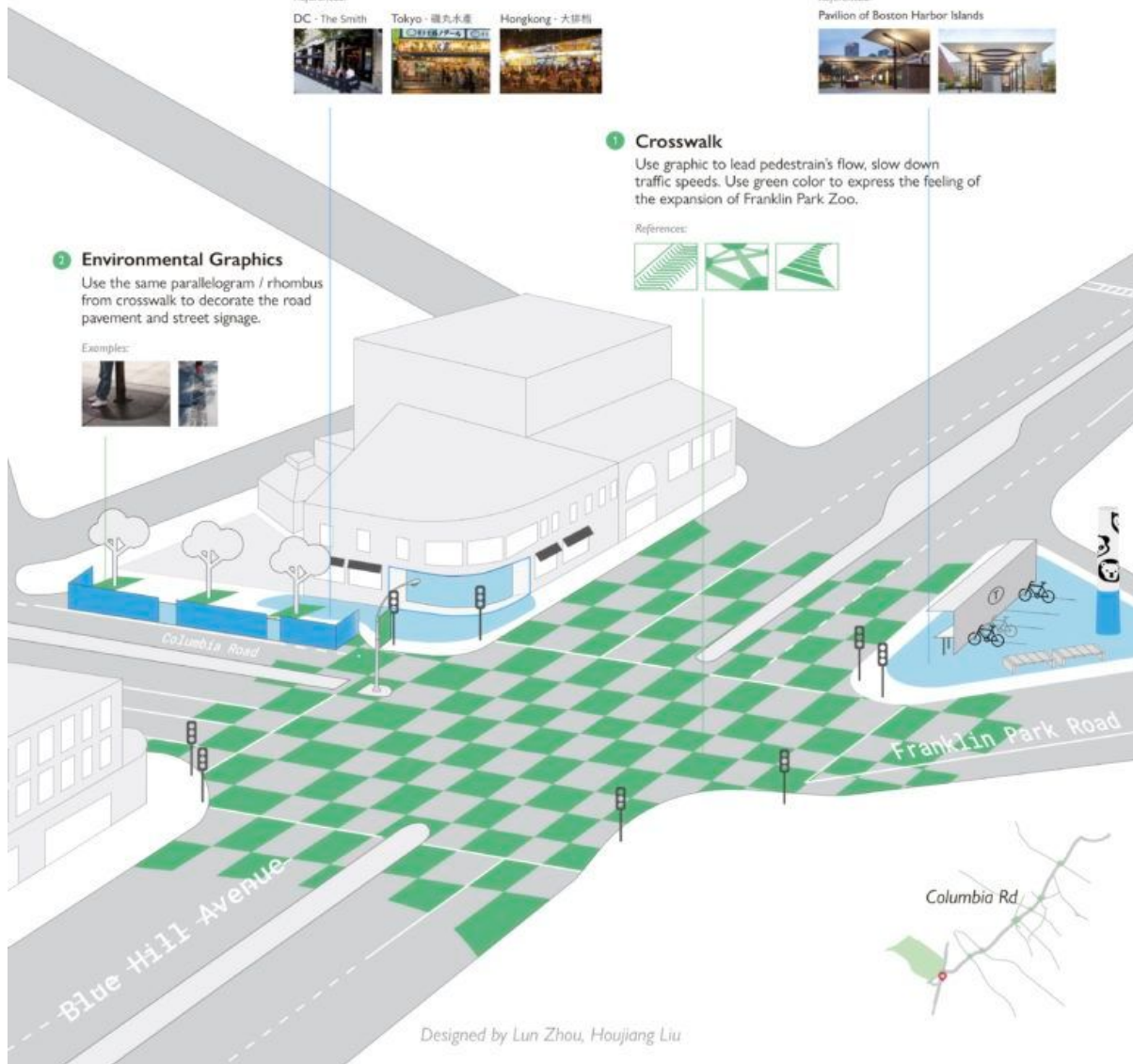
References:



2 Environmental Graphics

Use the same parallelogram / rhombus from crosswalk to decorate the road pavement and street signage.

Examples:



Designed by Lun Zhou, Houjiang Liu

Snapshot of Project by Lun Zhou and Houjiang Liu.

Bringing these various perspectives together both inside and out of the classroom contributed to an engaging and meaningful semester, with final student projects that reflected a genuine understanding of the nuances and key issues at hand.

“This studio class was a truly unique and awe-inspiring experience. Our readings, discussions and assignments had us observing ourselves as ethnographers in urban settings and it also had us uncovering the motives behind other people’s exploration of cities, and what really makes a place a place,” described **Erin Brenneman**, Experience Design graduate student. “The class shook things up for me, really took me out of my shell, and allowed me to gain a fresh perspective – a street-level view – of the physical land and culture around me. I saw Columbia Road through the lens of its people. Their problems became my problems and my desire to help to improve their experience and perception of the neighborhood quickly took on deeper meaning for me – it became personal.”

The class was group-based, which naturally facilitated teamwork and collaboration among the students.

“We used the studio a lot for brainstorming, for gathering, collaborating, working together on our discoveries in the field. We don’t live on campus, so for us, the studio turned into our home,” explained **Estefania Ciliotta Chehade** (Master of Fine Arts, Experience Design), who worked on a team with **Jeremy Brodeur** (Master of Fine Arts, Experience Design) and **Sylvia Zepeda** (Master of Science, Experience Design). “Some of the Experience Design Studio 1 classes were held there giving us the chance to keep working on the project while receiving feedback from Kristian, our professor, and from our peers. That’s another benefit from the studio, it enhances learning through communicating and sharing ideas with your peers, even though you might not be working on the same project. I believe it helps develop skills such as teamwork, communication, and adaptability, as well as building a sense of community.” This team project can be found [here](#).

Another important feature of this studio was the partnership with [LivableStreets Alliance](#), which gave students even more of the first-hand perspective and expertise needed to succeed in any community-based project. The students worked with **Tony Lechuga**, the Emerald Necklace Program Manager for LivableStreets Alliance, who manages all aspects of the program including advocacy, project oversight, and technical assistance.

“For us, this was about building momentum. There has been an abundance of talk without action all along the corridor, so the community definitely feels some skepticism and fatigue around promises,” Lechuga explained. “Therefore, the goal of collaborating with Northeastern was to begin a discussion about what the community wants the corridor to look and feel like. I imagined that ideally, over the semester, the students would begin having conversations with the community that would help with our gathering of perspectives and that they would possibly help identify particular areas of community concern.”

Lechuga reiterates how this first-hand interaction with the communities, through the site visits and conversations, is an important part of building greater community agency around small projects. In fact, when it comes to these small projects, he cites the success of the corridor’s new [Sip & Spoke Bike Kitchen](#), which integrates a full-service bicycle shop and café and helps to establish a place on Columbia Road where previously there was a completely forgotten building.

“Seeing the community excitement around that project, I decided it would be great to pursue opportunities to do similar placemaking along the corridor that was driven by community concerns and desires, and south to provide a quality of life benefit to the people who live and work along the corridor,” Lechuga described. “We originally thought a semester would be too short to actually work out all the details of building something out, but surprisingly, some of the student projects made great connections and have potential to move forward, which is amazing.”

For Lechuga and LivableStreets Alliance, the goal moving forward is to keep building this momentum to establish more places along the corridor that string together the

various communities along the 2-mile stretch, with the potential to ultimately consider a full-corridor redesign. Read more about these goals in a recent feature [article](#) in the *Dorchester Reporter*, which also makes a specific reference to the work of Northeastern's Experience Design students!

This Experience Design graduate studio had a lasting impact on the community and the students in the course.

“The studio helped me figure out how experience design differs from other kinds of design, and the Columbia Road project did speak for itself,” concluded graduate student **Houjiang Liu** (Master of Fine Arts, Experience Design). “We were not asked to refine the road construction or build any infrastructure alongside, but to discover the relationship between neighborhood surroundings and urban public space and to find opportunities to build connections for them. As a designer, this class made me learn how to sort things out and make decisions, more than solving problems but evaluating methods.”

Learn more about the student projects by visiting the Experience Design [community website](#).