

***2009 Ernest A. Lynton Award for
Scholarship of Engagement Winner:***
Getting Out of the Tour Bus

Nick Tobier

Nick Tobier was recognized as the winner of the 2009 Ernest A. Lynton Award for the Scholarship of Engagement, which recognizes a faculty member who connects his or her teaching, research, and service to community engagement. The Lynton Award program is managed by the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) based at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and the award is presented at the annual conference of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

My first visit to Detroit was six years ago aboard a bus of University faculty. We had come in from Ann Arbor for a focused retreat in Detroit, 45 minutes away. The visit coincided with the opening of a University center in Midtown Detroit—a return of sorts for the University of Michigan to its city of origin after a 150-year absence. In reflecting on that visit, that center and my work in Detroit, I want to trace an arc that reflects on the layers of expectations in engaged practices—first in these introductory paragraphs through some of the larger questions I ask myself as an artist, and that I ask my students, and second through one specific class (From the Ground Up) that lived and worked together in Detroit..

The University of Michigan looms large in the state of Michigan. In Detroit, the University is the elite institution. The home of the flagship of this brand, Ann Arbor, while only 45 minutes west, is worlds away. Aside from shared interests in collegiate and professional sports, the interchange between the two cities and between the University and Detroit is, all too often, tangential.

The decisions to engage the city of Detroit carry tremendous territories to navigate, laced with issues of race, class, and paternalism, as well as optimism and aspirations for productive partnerships. That we do not enroll anywhere near the number of many students from the state's largest city as we do its affluent suburbs is plain to see. None of this was explicit in our excursion—we all, polite academic artists and designers, avoided the hard topics and tended towards the lofty and the abstract, occasionally veering to statements that included some version of “Saving Detroit,” or “what can we do to help.” The engagement with the City on a macro level and with specific community partners on a finer grain level is fraught with the information that feeds from these signals—absorbing general trends in segregation among races, classes, urban, and suburban distinctions.

How we act on these disparities can either perpetuate or continue uneven divisions of resources and power. The center houses, among other functions, an admissions office—an open gesture that reflects an acknowledgment that Detroit and the University can be closer to one another and a willingness to be part of reciprocal dialogues. The University can act in good faith, but without transcending and understanding the root causes of the questions, without formally acknowledging their presence as extending paternalistic structures, it can compound the conundrum.

I should add that we never really got off the bus on that visit. We got off to go into our meeting place in the University building; we got off to go into our hotel and got off to eat dinner in a casino. Other than that, we stared at the city from our bus windows. For most of my colleagues, that was their last visit. I wince, to this day, when I replay these memories, for I was complicit in each action.

Prompted by the profound distance I sensed—spatially, emotionally, intellectually—I shifted my work and teaching to center in Detroit. I have, for the last five years, taught a course that brings our undergraduate students into the city for a day each week to teach 4th-grade art in an under-resourced Detroit public school. I have lived and worked in the City, with students sharing this residential experience as well. The geographic focus of this work has been on the Lower East Side of Detroit—far from the midtown center of the University. Most of my work has been involved in using food and gardens as resources to build creative public goods. In each instance, I regard success as increasing the capacity of outsiders (we from the University) to negotiate their relationship to the City as a guest, to allow this process to take priority over the anticipated product, and to be part of a reciprocal process in which mutual strengths are shared among University participants and neighborhood partners. As a representative of the University, as much as I work as an individual artist, I must also accept the burden of that association as an opportunity to work towards a broader conception of what the University can be.

Every day in Detroit I try to remember that bus weekend. Every semester beginning a project with students I recall my first impulses, my internal wonderings as well as my external verbalizations of a mixed stew of confusion, misunderstanding, and guilt. Since it has taken me several continuous years to build trusted friends and relationships among individuals and with community organizations, what can I legitimately expect of my students, my colleagues, or my administrators encountering some of these same questions for the first time? How can I anticipate these questions and serve as some sort of bridge between the University and the communities of groups and individuals I have come to know and value as trusted friends and partners? Part of my aspiration is that more and more relationships develop over time. And that everyone gets off the bus and stays awhile.

From the Ground Up: A Living Learning Engagement Class and Project in Detroit

[I]f we really want to speak of roots, let us rely on metaphor all the way, and let us imagine the history of our food culture as a growing—not a shrinking—plant. It gradually burrows into the earth, seeking vital nourishment wherever it can, implanting its roots precisely in places as distant as possible (sometimes unimaginable.) The product is on the surface—visible, clear and well-defined: that is us. The roots are underneath—generous, numerous and diffuse.

—Massimo Montanari, *Food is Culture*, Columbia University Press, 2006

I use the following analysis of one specific project in depth to describe ways of evaluating a process-rich University-community partnership. This lens can be used as a way to look at achievements, deficits, and future aspirations. The process involved daily written reflections from both guest students and hosts, and their words give voice to questions and insights.

From the Ground Up was a class and is a continuing series of engagements that are physically involved in food and we used growing, cultivating, preparing, and sharing food as both physical acts as well as operative metaphors:

To frame this experience with some descriptive context: The City of Detroit is a massive 137-square-mile sprawl. With less than half of its 1950 population, the city resembles a gap-toothed smile—with far more gaps than teeth. (Detroit's patterns of segregation, unequal and predatory lending practices, and uneven distribution of municipal, social, and financial power, all of which privilege whites over blacks, are very well outlined in the introduction to Thomas Sugrue's superb book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton University Press, revised ed. 2005.) Detroit is a city impoverished by generations of these structural forces, and the lack of resources is apparent in the physical city—from crumbling homes, to frayed neighborhoods, to an absence of basic services and access to the resources that sustain and nourish. Especially food.

For the purposes of organization, I have broken the experience into constituent parts, each with an introductory remark and followed, when available, by written student reflections done on-site. The parts:

- I. Introduction: The Physical Challenge and Task
- II. Living and Working with Groups
- III. Daily Routines: Eating at the Soup Kitchen
- IV. The Larger Context of Our Work
- V. Being a Guest
- VI. Being a Host
- VII. Creative Responses
- VIII. Conclusion: The Real Task—Continuing the Relationships

I. Introduction: The Physical Challenge and Task

There is not a single full-service grocery chain that operates in Detroit. How did this happen? To understand before being understood is what I asked of myself and of my students—how this happened and how we act with this understanding is a process of learning and responding with progressively more responses. Instantaneous solutions are neither sustainable nor appropriate.

We lived and worked in Detroit in May 2008, where we built a community gathering space from locally harvested materials. The gathering space is an entrance to EarthWorks, a garden started by the Capuchin Soup Kitchen to provide fresh produce to the kitchen. While our central question was this garden, the provisions of fresh produce to a neighborhood, a soup kitchen in the absence of other sources, our meta-questions revolved and evolved around what it means to enter a community.

The physical evidence of our work is wonderfully unambiguous. There is now a welcome structure poised at the entrance to the children's garden, built by hand by the students with materials found or harvested locally, and, at several times, built with help from neighborhood volunteers and youth groups. The acts of building served to unify the group of students and ground them in something concrete that they could build for someone else. Understanding of the inter-woven role of each component of our experience varied from student to student at the beginning in terms of physical stamina, and with one aspect of timber framing, where height and ladder use was more alarming to some students than others.

In most respects, the physical aspects of the work carry immediate gratification (aside from the plantings and bee cultivation, which are dependent on a longer time scale than our four weeks to see for one's own eyes). These also indicate a growing proficiency in earth building, timber framing, and the transplanting and care of plants.

The accomplishment of the physical tasks satisfied one component of the project. The less quantifiable aspects of students learning central issues that are larger than the task at hand—inequities among race and class distributions, the history of segregation in the city and the politics of paternalistic efforts—are what linger for me as opportunities to grow, and the central misconception I can identify is that the mere act of doing is sufficient. I have learned that these need to be addressed over a longer time frame. However explicit I tried to make them during the time on-site, I also recognize that it takes time for individuals to see themselves as representatives of an attitude or a privilege, and to see themselves as having different roles in different communities.

II. Living and Working with Groups

Most often our work involved some sort of group—with one another, with our host families, with neighbors. The following written reflections speak to these quests and questions:

1. “Insects tattooing my skin.” When the surroundings morph into who you are today and who you deeply want to become, that’s community. “Father holding my hand.” Children reach out their hands instinctively, knowing that it makes little sense to walk unaccompanied. Children reach out their hands, confident that they will be grasped and held, because that’s what you do when you love. That’s community.
2. I find that many of us seeking community are yearning for answers to unfilled childhood hands outstretched; outstretched in the earnest honesty that 5-year-olds have, that 15-year-olds smirk at, that 20- or 25- or 30-year-olds look back on with longing.

There are places where our surroundings become infused and confused with our souls, and that’s community: when our sense of modesty is supplanted by the courage to reach out our hands, daring to believe that someone will grasp on and hold.

But community isn’t forced. It isn’t created because you read the recipe in a book and it isn’t maintained because you followed the rules. Community grows on collective vulnerability, reinforced by the presence of others taking that same plunge of faith.

So where’s community? It probably starts with the children, because they don’t yet know that being exactly who they are is something to be ashamed of. It grows when spirit is accessed, through song or common interest, through faith or common strife, through journeying or reckless abandon. Community is found when you stop trying and start letting, when you stop thinking and start feeling, and when it comes, you’ll know. So if it’s the gospel choir that lifts your soul, let it. Or if it’s a sunny spring morning planting cabbage behind Gleaners Food Bank, let it. If it’s exploring the city by getting lost on purpose, let it. Community sneaks into vibrant existence when you least expect it—after 10 hours of stomping cob, for instance.

III. Daily Routines: Eating at the Soup Kitchen

The other components of working with EarthWorks were perhaps less easy to quantify, and these included eating and interacting with guests of the soup kitchen and the internship opportunities offered with other components of the Capuchin organization. I evaluated these from observation and from two in-process conversations held with one student at a time to determine their ability to engage with people other than each other. The following excerpts were written side by side—one student and one tablemate at the kitchen:

1. I was reminded of a conversation I had previously with a man in the soup kitchen at lunch. This prompt sparked this memory because he spoke of the ways he wanted to improve society and he had developed such an elaborate plan on how he was going to achieve these hopes—yet he never acted....
2. “I am going to give back to society going around to schools and talking about life and how to make a difference” he said. “I would mentor because the youth today are the future.” The best intentions are nothing without action. What holds us back? Why do so many of us wait for the scenarios to change? Wait until the odds are in our favor? What does it take for us to move—bringing life to the dreams and intentions our mind provides us? Why does the death of others often stimulate our progression and make us sprint through life in order to achieve our predetermined goals? A dream is nothing without a plan, and a plan is nothing without action, and action is nothing without hope for change. Who will instill this hope and who needs to take action on a plan to conquer a dream that he has.... Should I?

IV. The Larger Context of Our Work

Getting to know the city and its neighborhoods was a large part of the project, with specific attention to perceptions of the city by outsiders, fear of the city from outsiders, and a tension between the suburban region and the city of Detroit. Many of these fears and perceptions are fueled by larger critical crises in race and class relations, and unpacking these issues for and with students is something we could only hope to start. I comment more on this larger framing below.

In the initial design of the course objectives I wanted the students to develop a meaningful and complex understanding of the city in the hopes that they individually would find a place for themselves and an avenue to continue their growing knowledge. I assembled a list of visits to places and people that offered a broad view of the city while hewing closely to urban agriculture and food systems. Visits to places included using the People Mover (a comically short-distance elevated transit system used by a very small number around the downtown) as a tool for exploration (the exhortation was to see the city as an explorer rather than a tourist with the clarification that an explorer seeks to discover while the tourist seeks verification of a prior or pre-set assumption). Students worked in pairs, getting off the train at designated stops and experiencing the immediate vicinity as explorers. We gathered at a central spot and shared these observations. What struck me was how pleased the students were to be trusted with being on their own. We explored the monumental (the abandoned train station) and the small-scale (a laundromat, a neighborhood corner store), the institutional (The Detroit Institute of the Arts and the Ford Rouge Plant) and the emergent (a neighborhood arts center). We attended a worship service at the historic Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, where we were asked to stand and be recognized for our work, and went on a two-day visit to Toronto, where we worked with and met with two efforts related to our urban agriculture project: FoodShare, a food bank and

distribution center, and Dufferin Grove Park, a community park with a pizza oven at its center.

The following written reflections give insight into preconceptions as well as evolving perceptions:

1. I came to Detroit looking for a way to answer some of my own questions and to have a more complete picture of what this city is about underneath the surface. At the end of our internship what I really have found is that the city itself is where the questions lie and there are a lot of people trying to answer those questions both in their own way and by working together with other community members.

Detroit may seem empty to some from the outside because it lacks the ‘normal’ amount of hustle and bustle, skyscrapers, megastores, and moneyholders that we are used to seeing in an urban metropolis, but Detroit can’t be taken at face value. What matters more is recognizing, understanding, and working in the context of the many layers that run deep in the city’s history, its neighborhoods, its organizations/businesses, and its people.

I think that the ridiculous dreams of some, the undying love and understanding of others and the willingness to invest time, serious thought, and money from still others are the start of a combination that is going to make this city grow.

When we arrived in Detroit on 8 May, my relationship with the city was a smattering of blurred and isolated childhood memories: a day at the museum, a dance competition at Cobo Hall, a hockey game at Joe Louis, a Tigers game at the old stadium, a trip to the zoo. I knew token history about the city—how it was the home of automobile innovation, how it bustled at the turn of the last century, how it had been the hub of Motown music, how there had been violence here some decades before I was born, how it has been experiencing white flight, and oh—don’t forget—Eminem lived here, too. In the past, I found that people will often know the name ‘Detroit’ even if they don’t really know of Michigan. The world knows about Detroit. Or does it?

2. Detroit carries a stigma—Detroit?! Why would you go there?! One really can’t answer that question until he/she has come here. Pre-From the Ground Up, I would answer quite un-specifically, saying, “To discover the gems of this city that carries a tarnished reputation.” We have seen many of these gems: the Renaissance Center, the Spirit of Detroit, Comerica Park, the Detroit institute of Art, Zeitgeist, Burt’s, Eastern Market, Belle Isle, the Heidelberg Project, and Mexican Town, to begin the list.

3. In Detroit, it seems inappropriate not to acknowledge another person. I especially like running along the river walk in the morning. Although the streets surrounding are devoid of pedestrian traffic, there are a number of people about the river walk, walking, running, or sitting, and all of them are friendly. I exchange greetings with all of them, and occasionally I'll get a 'keep up the good work!' These exchanges aren't long but they stitch together a sense of community and goodwill that fosters connection and community.

I see this at the Capuchin soup kitchen as well. The folks there are friendly and at any given table at any meal I was able to engage in gratifying conversations with perfect strangers. What I enjoyed even more, though, was the opportunity to listen to and observe the dynamics of the soup kitchen community. People know each other there, they share life together, they seek out each other to ask, "You alright?" I ate in the East Quad cafeteria for two years. Everybody knows all sorts of people at every meal, but the community at the Capuchin kitchen way supersedes what I observed at school. We've come to Detroit to explore community and how it builds. Well, guess what: Community is here and it's happening! Of course, community must grow, but it is very clear that Detroiters are a community and they are surviving. Together.

V. Being a Guest

I wanted to challenge what I understood from pre-site meetings (and two concerned parents who expressed that they wished their offspring were going anywhere but Detroit) as the perception of Detroiters. I assembled a diverse range of people to meet with, across neighborhoods, races, ages, points of view. Through our own group exercises in generative interviewing and active listening, I wanted my students to think of themselves as guests who were given a gift from whomever we met and to receive that gift with sincerity and some degree of gravity.

Responses to each visit varied. I calibrated responses based on observations of body language, degree of willingness to engage, level of inquiry and ability to translate what we practiced with one another with people from outside our group. These goals were met increasingly as the time went on—students who were quiet and reticent found their voices, and students who were standoffish and defensive became less so. I used similar one-on-one check-ins to gauge and discuss student responses as well as their written responses.

Those students who understood our role as guests did best at fostering an atmosphere in which the person we met with was compensated by the meeting. Often I observed that students treated the visits more like passive scenarios where they received information. This is the primary misconception endemic to the process and the time in their lives when they (the students) understand themselves as recipients and beneficiaries of knowledge and information rather than as active participants and

responsible guests. The following two reflections are the voices of students negotiating their roles as guests in Detroit.

1. We have been on the listening end of communication a lot during our time here. We have had the honor of meeting with and interviewing remarkable people: Malik Yakini, activist and community leader; Grace Lee Boggs of the Bogg center; the Capuchin friars; Patrick and Stacey at EarthWorks; Ms. G. Asenath Andrews, Principal of Catherine Ferguson Academy; Father Tom Lumpkin of the Day House; Sharon of the Day House; Lolita Hernandez, our dear house mom who we have learned is quite the local celebrity(!), and I'm sure I'm forgetting someone(s). These people are distinguished men and women who know Detroit intimately. They are respected and sought-after thinkers, each with particular values and approaches to their city and our world. They have challenged us from all different angles and given us many feasts for thought. Now, it is time to sift their words through our minds. We must talk with each other and the people that we will be with when we leave Detroit. By combining the words and experiences of others (from in or out of Detroit) with our own, we love the city in the way that the pastor at Hartford Baptist described last Sunday. We make the city necessary to us and ourselves necessary to the city. This is our opportunity, privilege, and responsibility.

2. Begin it.

Begin it—not “do it.”

It's not up to him or her or me to do—only to start.

Maybe one person can change the world but maybe another has to begin that dream. Aren't we all changing the world in our own way? There are no buildings, monuments, or streets named after us (who knows though—maybe some day) but we change each other and others change us and it creates a ripple effect.

Little stones ripple just like big ones. The big ones make more noise and bigger waves but the little ones change the surface and the bottom too. And a handful of little ones can make a big ripple too. Aren't you more likely to pick up and toss the pebbles anyway? I don't know many people who toss boulders. Change doesn't have to come from one big thing—the little ones build up and upon each other—they change the surface and structure. The big ones just wreak havoc; sometimes that's good but other times you have to let the little ripples collide and see what comes of it.

Begin it.

Others can carry the ripple on—it's silly to throw a pebble and expect to control where and when it ends. It's just up to you to begin it and see where that ripple goes and how it handles the obstacles in its path and how it combines with other ripples and how far those go...

Begin it.

VI. Being a Host

Retrospectively, I see that each individual student surpassed their own internal thresholds and expectations—these range from those who evidenced this on a regular basis to others who grew in smaller ways that matched their comfort rather than my expectations. This was, we have to remember, a reciprocal relationship. There were no neutral interactions, and each of us as a University representative had a commensurate connection to our hosts.

While we were in Detroit, we built connections to artists, activists, home-stay families, and organizers who offered us perspective and context to understand contemporary and historic issues related to our work. In most senses, the subject of our work was often Detroit itself. Whether through our meals shared at the soup kitchen or with the people we met—while the task and charge of all these groups and individuals was growing and giving access to food, the complexities of race and class in Detroit were omnipresent, even as we visited parallel projects in Toronto.

Our hosts, families and individuals in the neighborhood who offered to board our students, had degrees of interaction that ranged from a few dinners a week to involving their guest student in church services and family celebrations. In many instances, our host families were more involved with the experience of their guest student than I could have anticipated. This home-stay experience—which gets the students out of their comfort bubble pretty quickly—gave contact and context both for the hosts and their guests. Two written reflections from our hosts:

1. It is not my job to make white people from the suburbs feel more comfortable in the city. I am a Black Activist. I used to be a Black Separatist, a farmer, a food grower by radical necessity rather than by fashion for local food. In order to work in Detroit you need to transcend your whiteness.
2. To the Detroit Twelve
All praise to you who came full of
Ardor looking for flora between
Broken whiskey bottles and ragged fauna that
Cover the Park most times and other areas we
Crisscross daily in the D wondering how to
Escape the sad present and then you
Fell in full of vip and vim working your special
Juju, yeah, pointing us to the bright future right here
Jumping in full techno color beats
Knocking us off dead center zoned
Now we sense possibility
Something blowing in the wind

VII. Creative Responses

There were plenty of instances when students were able to use open writing as a chance to access the complex emotional and physical sensations that they were contending with. We simply called these creative responses to our daily work. They were held at the end of long days and the collective goal was to give an outlet for responding to challenges and to see where those responses were coming from, based on individual autobiographies and emotional ranges. It was important that I was part of these as a participant rather than as a leader to enable students to relate to me as part of the group and an individual facing these challenges live, as it were.

The evidence of the efficacy of this work was both observed in the convivial atmosphere, which was a useful foil to diffuse difficult situations at times, and in the wide range of responses that students were willing to share with one another that revealed themselves as vulnerable, impressionable, and affected by our time in the city.

Students revealed their positions relative to the challenges we faced daily as they wrote either implicitly or explicitly in response. Some revealed the sources for their responses in revelations from childhood or past experiences that allowed the others to see their perspective via this illustration. It was a joy to be all together, writing furiously, and to see the willingness to read intimate thoughts allowed.

1. With all of the new people, places, projects and ideas we have been introduced to in the past two weeks here in Detroit, it helps to get words down on paper to help us realize, organize, and explore what we are thinking and feeling during this time of new experience. I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we have all been journaling pretty regularly, but another approach to discovering some of the issues in our constantly turning gears has been creative writing led by a wonderful writer, our host and Detroit, Lolita Hernandez. Our little family has gathered a few times to receive writing prompts from Lolita and sometimes other people in our group, and then we take off with our thoughts and our pens.

2. A response to insects:

It would be interesting to tour a beehive

One of the drones would be the tour guide.

They say that the drone bees are only good for one thing, but I think their forgotten role is giving tours of their humming sanctuary.

“To the left we have some royal jelly, and to the right we have the queen who eats green jell-o for life.

Down we have some baby honeys, and up we have a huge human in white who thinks that they are our babysitter. We humor it.

Now we will pass through this geometric hole to the next leg of our tour, mind the sticky substances surrounding your entire body.

Ok, here we are among the lovely ladies, they won't notice you but don't take it personally.

Ok, we've reached the end of the tour, please turn left at the next honeycomb, and Max will receive you at the gift shop where you can purchase....

Horseradish, mustard, strawberry jelly and the queen bee's life cycle calendar.

Buzz again."

3. I am sure that this twitch in my eyelid should not be sticking around as long as it has been. My glassy stare must be confused about this contraction of its protector.

When something you have relied on so heavily begins to act in unfamiliar ways it's exciting. My pupil and cornea are rejoicing. My iris is energetic, the veins in my lens keep pumping but now at record speed.

Sometimes I am eyeballs, but is that only because that's where the action is taking place?

In part I am what I see but what I see does now shape the way my heart beats blood.

There is a twitch in my eye and I hope it stays because

I am always looking for a new perspective.

Is that what this is about? About making it all fit a mold that is ideal? But we are not—not like you and your boys who sit at the top. We will not fit our lives into your analysis of the current economic situation; will not fit our futures into your forecast for the world. The only forecast we listen to is the one beating within our hearts. And so you take, and you give, and you wonder why things aren't changing. You blame, and you give up. But save yourself the disappointment—by listening, understanding—that we are not you; do not want to be like you. We want to live in the space between where we are and where you'd like us to be—so put down your models, your calculators, and your silly talk. Come to us, to other people—to see who we are, and hear who we want to become.

Imagine understanding a "problem" from the ground up, and the humanity to it. We are like you, in a way, already. We have creative plans, dreams for our children, and pain and joy to share. Come to us, openly, and free yourselves of expectation, greed, and the aching thrill of power. Let your humanity connect with ours; only then can we begin to overcome.

4. to a found Polaroid photo of Eastern Market:

When I look at the sky, I see a constant that spans more than just a person, a city, a country, all those identifications that may either combine or divide

us, or both at the same time. It's important for me to see the commonalities in things rather than what divides. I feel like we're taught those things that divide us our whole lives.

I see bright blue sky, white clouds, and I see home. Only a man-made building or post to differentiate where, when. Only a man-made law or belief to differentiate who. Is community to finally realize that the things around us are not to be kept secret but shared? Should we start to share possessions and places like we share a blue sky?

Maybe sharing those things like we share a gray sky....

5. I am....

i am the prompt that is impossible to respond to. i am the prompt that makes you stare at the page dully trying to remember who is "I" and who am, is, are, were, was, or had "I" been?

i am changing every day, and i cannot find pretty little adjectives or nouns to describe how or why.

and that's the problem.

writing and speaking—saying and clarifying,

trying to make people understand something that i can't even solidify.

communication is my warm wall.

VIII. Conclusion: The Real Task—Continuing the Relationships

At our open house towards the end of our stay, we got to see how dynamic these relationships can be, and see our project come to life. Over the next months and years, as the herbs and flowers we planted street-side grew, the beehives and baking projects take form from fall harvest to a regular group of students who have both continued their connections to EarthWorks, to Detroit, and especially to their hosts, I am eager to see how we can extend this work through what Grace Lee Boggs offered with an invitation to "futuring" and look forward to seeing and hearing what we may glean from all this. I am excited to see more and more of our students moving to Detroit after they graduate rather than Chicago or New York.

On our last night together someone said that the project "would have been so much cooler if we could have had the whole summer in Detroit." A longer time frame and perhaps a different hierarchy of time spent—a shift more towards context and understanding—can transform all of us.

I think the time scale of the revelation and the work will continue for each of these individuals, and while I can not forcibly be part of directing that, I provided the catalyst and the challenges for them to continue.

Once I got off the bus is when my engagement with the City really began. But it took time—time that needed to be spent encountering resistance, misunderstanding. Time that could not be leapfrogged by top-down designs or programs designed from afar. To understand before being understood—it is what I asked of myself and my students, and I ask for each of us as partners. The University Center is still there—there are exhibits in the lobby, including work from my 4th-grade students and Detroit artists as well as those from Ann Arbor and further afield. More and more faculty use the Center, and there are events from summer camps to lectures. Right now, the front door to Woodward Avenue, the main entrance from the City to the inside, is by buzzer access. Opening the door and letting more of the City in and the University out will only enhance the relationship—as simple as getting off the bus.

Author Information

Currently an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan School of Art & Design, in 2003, Nick Tobier studied landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and subsequently worked as a landscape architect. He is a lifelong participant-observer of street life and the social life of public places. These inherently layered scenarios are at the core of his work as artist and educator, and Tobier's practice and pedagogy reflect his belief in the power of social dynamism and the fundamental role of artist as catalyst and conduit in this relationship. In his current work, Tobier focuses on the integration of art and society, and actively challenges artists to expand their self-definitions and scope.

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