

History of the Waukegan Project

In 2002, Waukegan became a member of Illinois Main Street, an organizing branch of the national Main Street Program that is run by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has developed a philosophy for downtown revitalization that forms the basis for the four-point Main Street Approach- accomplishing downtown revitalization through organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. Waukegan Main Street, formerly the Waukegan Downtown Association, is the local organization in Waukegan responsible for implementing the Main Street Program. In 2004, the Lieutenant Governor's Office of the State of Illinois, which sponsors Illinois Main Street, asked Archeworks to work with the Main Street Community of Waukegan, Illinois, to develop design ideas to help revitalize downtown.

About Waukegan

Waukegan is a city located about 40 miles north of Chicago. Today Waukegan has a diverse population of about 95,000, with about 50% of its residents being Hispanic and about 20% being African-American.

In the early- to mid-20th century, Waukegan was a hub for commercial and industrial activity. Companies such as U.S. Steel called Waukegan home and major stores including Woolworth's attracted people from surrounding areas to Waukegan's downtown.

But in the late 20th century, Waukegan fell on hard economic times. Industries closed while suburban malls opened, draining Waukegan of its economic vitality. Even the historic Genesee Theatre closed its doors.

Waukegan is still trying to recover from this loss of industry, but there are efforts underway to revitalize Waukegan. Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill has developed a twenty-year plan for Waukegan's future, the Genesee Theatre has been restored and recently re-opened its doors, and Waukegan is now a member of Illinois Main Street.

Our group and our ideas

Our team was made up of a sociologist, a product designer, an architect, an interior designer, a musician, and a film and marketing person. Our facilitators were both architects. We began our year getting to know each other as well as a crash course in community development, funding models for revitalization, various city guidelines from across the United States, the Illinois Main Street Program and an introduction to the existing revitalized Main Streets across Illinois. We studied Waukegan's history, its demographics, and the various attempts in the past for

economic development and interviewed and surveyed a number of residents, community leaders and storeowners in an attempt to form our own picture of Waukegan. It became overwhelmingly clear to us that one of the main issues facing the community was the possibility that any revitalization project would overlook and potentially push out certain socio-economic and ethnic groups, some of which are the majority of Waukegan's population. It was also our concern that with revitalization of this magnitude, good design and architecture is often withheld from these groups because of accessibility to the financial means, qualified architects and designers and the simple awareness of smart growth development guidelines.

Over the course of the first six months of the project, we posed several possible solutions for Waukegan ranging from small and tangible tasks to larger and more process-oriented projects. By the midterm, we were working on three varied projects. First, we secured a storefront in which to display our logo for the redevelopment area we dubbed "Genesee". It would also be used as an information center for Waukegan Main Street and could be a meeting place for the community, storeowners and potential stakeholders. Secondly, we investigated the redesigning of the pedestrian walkway that leads from the public parking garage to the Main Street. Our third project was to put together a set of guidelines for standards that would affect not only the built environment but the streetscape as well. It was our goal to make these useful yet accessible to the wider community. In addition, we began working on a process by which good design is made accessible to a community in large and small-scale projects by finding resources and partnerships. **Design Genesee** was born.

We developed a short inspirational and promotional video that promotes downtown Waukegan, promotes the accompanying website that we will use as the vehicle to make the guidelines and design process accessible to the community, and will serve as a potential model for future Main Street revitalization programs in marketing and developing awareness, ideas and community participation.

What if a Street Becomes a Place?

Design Genesee promotes innovative design as a means to revitalizing downtown Waukegan, Illinois, beginning with Genesee Street, Waukegan's Main Street. Innovative, quality design has the power to transform this street into a *place* of vibrant community, cultural, and commercial activity. The purpose of this website is both to raise consciousness about design as a means to improving the quality of life in Waukegan and to empower community members to realize quality design in their own community.

Design Genesee is an innovative design initiative that links Waukegan residents with design resources they need to achieve quality design on scales both large and small. It is not a set of design guidelines or design standards, for such prescriptive measures are rigid and serve to stifle the creativity that is necessary for quality design. Design Genesee encourages community participation because good design expresses the identity of a place, and its own members best determine a community's identity. This website should, first, help the citizens of Waukegan realize that they have a stake in the design of their community, and second, help them acquire the resources—including design talent and sources of funding—that they need to bring quality design to Waukegan. Design Genesee does not dictate the content or form of design, but rather establishes a process that fosters creativity and encourages design appropriate to the context of Waukegan.

To prospective students

I chose to be at Archeworks for many reasons, the first of which was the idea of a self-directed study. I had just recently gone back to school in my thirties and realized that what I wanted out of education at this stage in my life was something that I could not seem to find in a “spoon-fed” environment. Other reasons for coming to Archeworks were about finding a different career path (or at least the chance to augment the one I am currently following). The field of design and architecture is so wide and having only completed a Bachelors in Arts years ago and more recently, an Associates in Interior Design, I wanted the chance to explore them in a real time, real life setting before I decide to commit to more education and a change in career.

What I ended up getting out of Archeworks was quite different than I expected but no less impressive. I underestimated the chance to meet people from different backgrounds and this has proven valuable on so many levels whether it be networking or simply seeing the world through different glasses. An amazing and inspiring fact about the people who join Archeworks, as well as the staff, is that I found them as passionate and excited about being there as I was. This may seem a simple fact and yet it proved to be one of the most important parts of my experience at Archeworks.

In terms of one's experience at Archeworks, I would first say that it varies with each year's team members, different projects and the changing facilitators involved with each project. It is likely that you will not have the same experience as I did and that is indicative of an equal value placed on the process *and* the product. This is not the same kind of “regular” experience you might find at a college or university where you take the same classes as the next guy and get the same test at the end. This experience carries with it the personal responsibility (and therefore personal reward) that comes from self-guided research and subsequent conversations and application of that knowledge. The topics covered in the Ethics and Futures class

were stimulating and woke up parts of my brain that I thought were permanently dormant due to years of working and life in general.

As it related to our project, the process was a fascinating and fast-paced race through community planning, architecture, funding models, sociological models (survey development), non-profit organizations, economic structures, city guidelines, green design, and redevelopment planning as well as a host of other skills such as web design, writing, public speaking, information organization and time management. The saying, "you will get out of it what you put into it", was never truer than at Archeworks.

The most important thing to gain from the experience at Archeworks is a personal experience of the ongoing dialog about collaborative and multi-disciplinary work in architecture and design for the social and environmental good of the world around us. Collaborative work is hard and it poses all kinds of problems. Some of those problems made themselves evident in our project. However, the lasting impression I have from my nine months at Archeworks is one of a collective of dedicated and intelligent people, eager to do the best work possible with the grandest of reasons and the most genuine of desires to do something good for the world. It has changed the way I look at my own work in terms of collaboration, it has informed and inspired me to use the creative process in different ways as a means to benefit society at large, and has set high standards for my own future career goals in design and/or architecture.