

# DESIGN CONNECT

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS:  
CASE STUDIES & IMPACT



Cornell University

**ENGAGED  
LEARNING+  
RESEARCH**

Dedicated to Jennifer Ng and Chris Hardy,  
the visionary founders of DesignConnect

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This report was independently printed and published with the support of Cornell University's Department of City and Regional Planning, and Engaged Learning + Research, a center at Cornell designed to advance academic service-learning, community-based research, and public scholarship.



# DESIGN CONNECT

## THE FIRST FIVE YEARS: CASE STUDIES & IMPACT

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**DESIGNCONNECT  
IS A STUDENT-LED  
COMMUNITY DESIGN  
ORGANIZATION BASED  
IN ITHACA NY.**

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Our mission is to empower students and communities by advancing collaborative, democratic and sustainable design and planning projects.



**We work with local communities like the  
Village of Endicott in Broome County, NY.**

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Despite its appearance, this parking lot is the heart of Endicott, functioning as the primary public space for festivals, parades and events. Endicott asked DesignConnect to create a vision and conceptual design for the space to better reflect its flexible character and establish a community space for all residents, this is the type of work that DesignConnect teams work on.

**We help communities move public-interest design and planning projects forward.**

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DesignConnect partners with local communities on civic projects, helping to conduct research, build consensus, generate ideas, and identify opportunities to move projects forward, such as through grants, fund-raising, media coverage or by building public support.



## **METHOD:** **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

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DesignConnect works directly with community members and stakeholders to learn from them and understand how we can be most helpful and produce work that will be of real value.

## **PROCESS:** **COLLABORATION & PARTICIPATION**

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DesignConnect projects aim to build a collaborative and participatory process in which citizens, community groups, local governments, and other stakeholders are all involved.

## **GOAL:** **SUSTAINABLE PROGRESS**


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DesignConnect works to build community ownership over projects, ensuring that the momentum generated will be sustained and the project will move forward independently.



# HOW WE FIND AND SCOPE PROJECTS

The DesignConnect Board issues an RFP to local communities twice a year, and chooses a few prospective projects based the organization’s selection criteria.


Mar	Apr	May	June	July
				
<b>RFP and project proposal reviewed</b>		<b>Additional research, site visits and interviews</b>		<b>Prospective projects refined</b>
After issuing an RFP to local contacts in Feb. the board and DC faculty advisor review all potential projects based on our selection criteria*.		The Board works with the DC faculty advisor to further examine each potential project to understand its physical, social, political, economic, and cultural context.		Working together with community representatives, the Board refines the scope and scale of each project to fit within a semester.
Phone interviews are conducted with the community representative from each project in order to gain a better understanding of the project’s scope.		This includes background research, two secondary interviews and outreach to community leaders. Projects are analyzed and 3-5 are chosen as prospective projects for the following semester.		The Board helps to identify what skills and experience will be needed for each project and helps a community representative prepare neccisary materials.

## \*DesignConnect’s Selection Criteria

- Quality of Leadership
- Alignment with DC’s Values
- Urgency & Readiness
- Long Term Viability
- Logistics & Potential Risks

# HOW WE WORK THROUGH PROJECTS

DesignConnect participants work in multidisciplinary student teams to produce deliverables that help communities move design and planning projects forward.

Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
				
<b>Projects chosen, teams assigned</b>		<b>Teams research, analyze, work, refine and present</b>		<b>Projects finished, feedback loops</b>
Projects are chosen and presented to students at info sessions during the first week of the semester, students submit applications.		Teams agree on their scope of work with communities, then conduct background research, field research, community outreach, analysis, community engagement, group work, and production of deliverables.		Teams present work at a final review for feedback before presenting to their communities, while the Board documents all work produced.
The Board reviews applications and builds teams based on skills needed for each project, aiming to build diverse teams with strong collective capacity.		During this time, the Board hosts workshops* and invites speakers to provide teams with relevant assistance at critical points during the semester, in addition to a mid-term reviews that provide feedback and peer review.		The Board holds feedback sessions with all teams and its advisory board, and determines if any changes should be made to the structure of the organization.

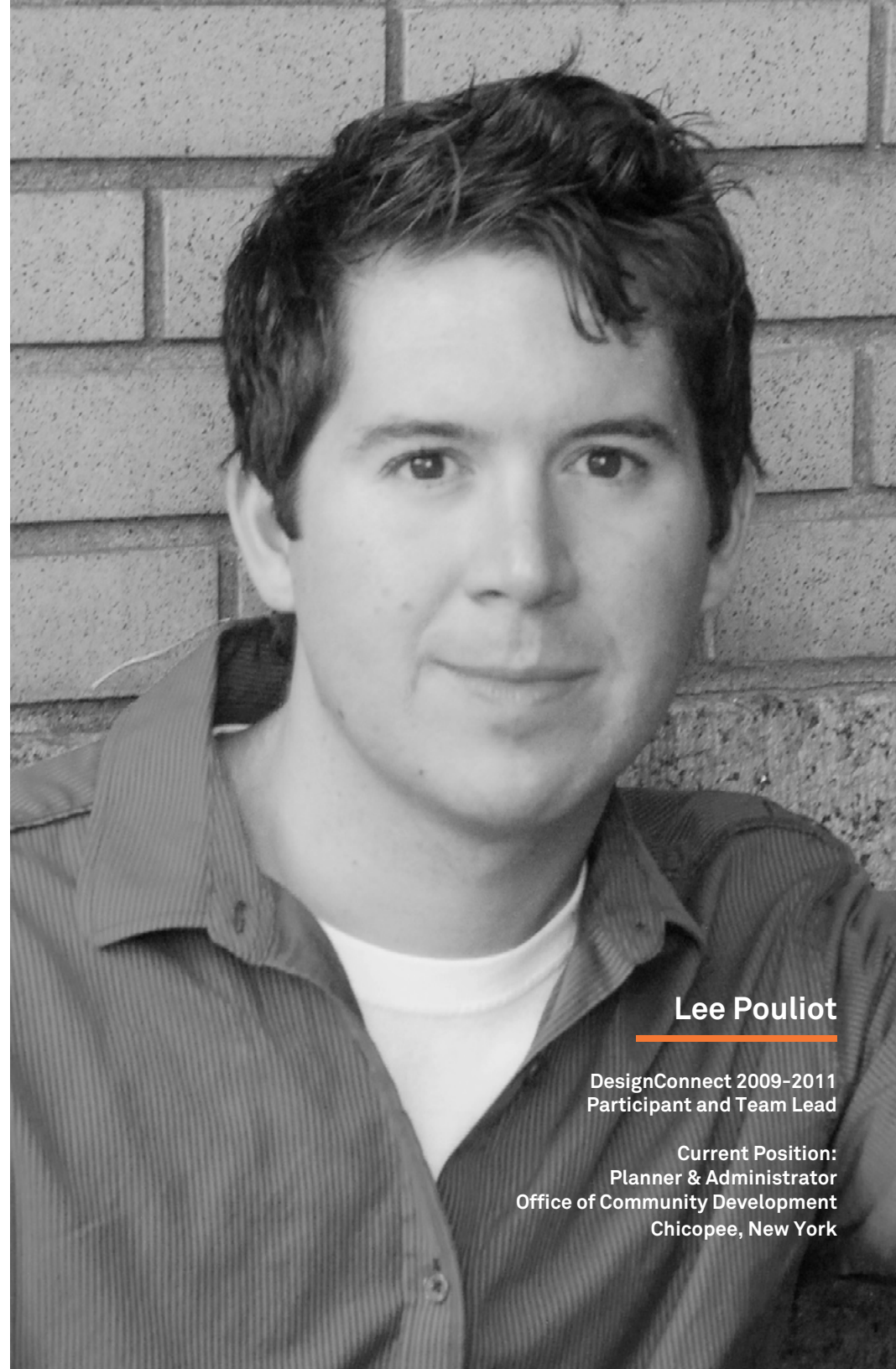
## \*Typical Workshop and Speaker Themes

- Team management and collaboration
- Scope of Work proposal writing
- Democratic research methods
- Community meeting facilitation
- Project delivery and hand-off

**“We were used to studio projects where you give a big presentation at the end of the semester and then wash your hands of it and start something new. This was different, we were always thinking about it because we knew it was real and that made it exponentially more important. DesignConnect provided one of the most valuable projects I worked on at Cornell. We all knew it was real and that changed our approach and gave the project a different character.”**

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“We tested out lots of different methods for running public meetings, we tried just about every method in the book, and we were always gauging the community on what worked and what didn’t. Eventually we found which methods worked best for our project and its specific context. That’s essentially what I do today working in a community development office, DesignConnect helped me develop skills that I use everyday in the work I do now.”



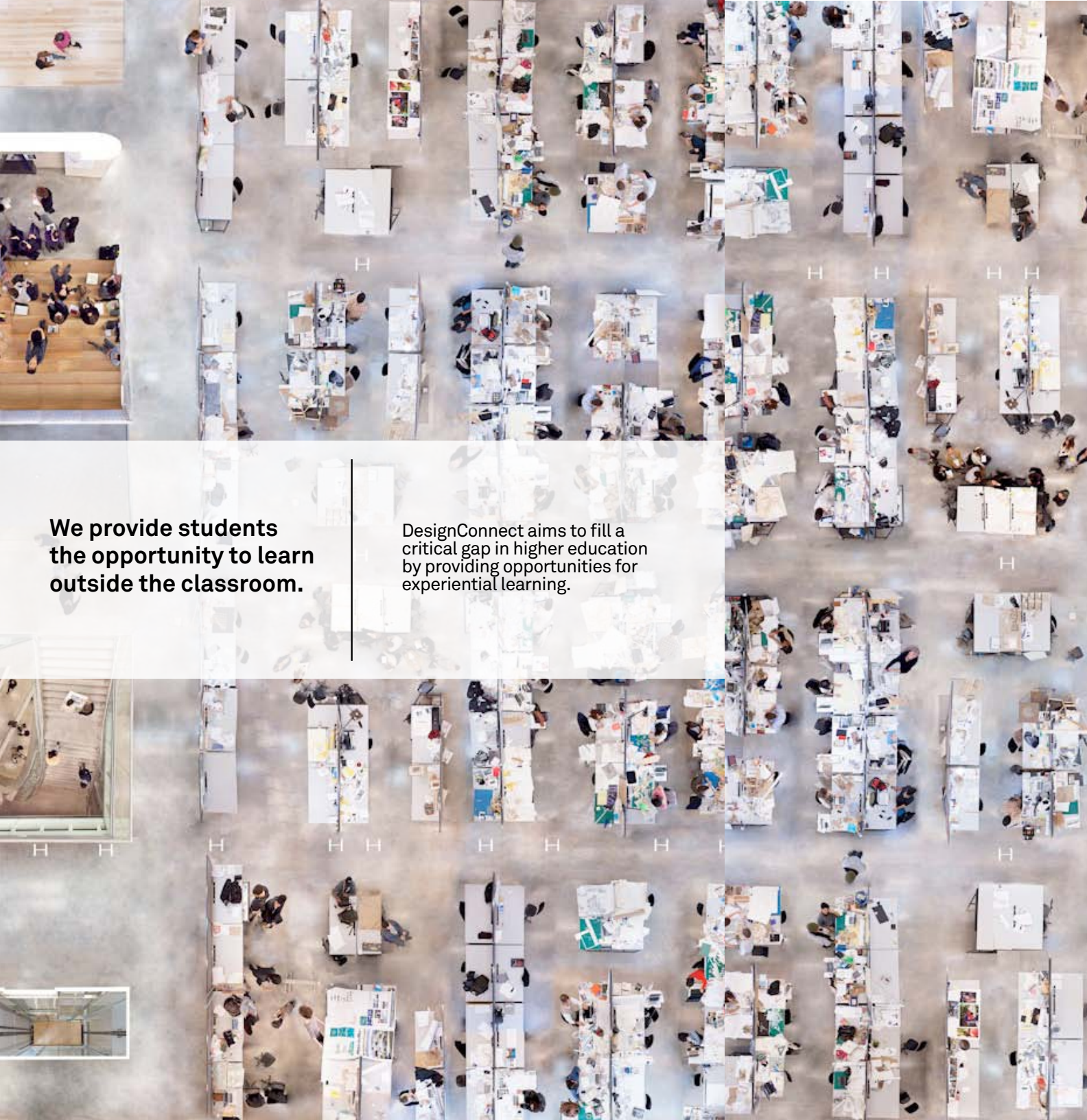
**Lee Pouliot**

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DesignConnect 2009–2011  
Participant and Team Lead

Current Position:  
Planner & Administrator  
Office of Community Development  
Chicopee, New York





**We provide students  
the opportunity to learn  
outside the classroom.**

DesignConnect aims to fill a critical gap in higher education by providing opportunities for experiential learning.

## **PROJECTS:** **MEANINGFUL PUBLIC SERVICE**

Involvement in public-interest projects that address real issues and affect real people provide students a sense of meaning and purpose, which drives them to produce their best work.

## **TEAMS:** **CROSS- DISCIPLINARY**

Working with a diverse team of peers on complex real-world challenges teaches students how to think and work collaboratively and builds networks across disciplines within the university.

## **RESULT:** **PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE**

Collaboration with peers who each have unique skills and expertise helps students to grow as leaders and develop the interpersonal skills that are critical for professional practice.



## WHO: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### Student Board

Made up of past participants, elected to run the organization

### Faculty Advisor

Has experience in community design; helps advise the board

### Community Representatives

Local community leaders who submit project proposals

### Student Participants

Undergrads, grads, and PhD students working on projects

### Faculty Mentors

One per team, chosen based on relevant project expertise

### Community at large

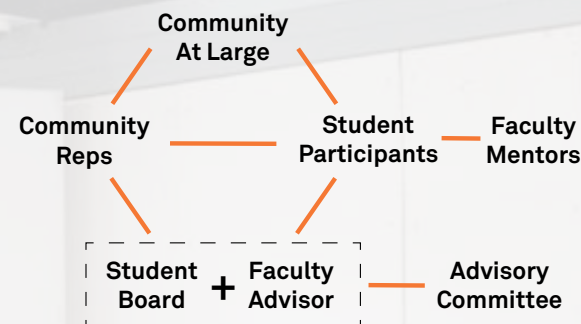
Residents, gov. officials, and other relevant stakeholders

### Advisory Committee

Select group of past board members and faculty advisors

## HOW: STRUCTURE OF ROLES

This organizational structure diagram illustrates how all parties interact, orange lines indicate direct interaction.

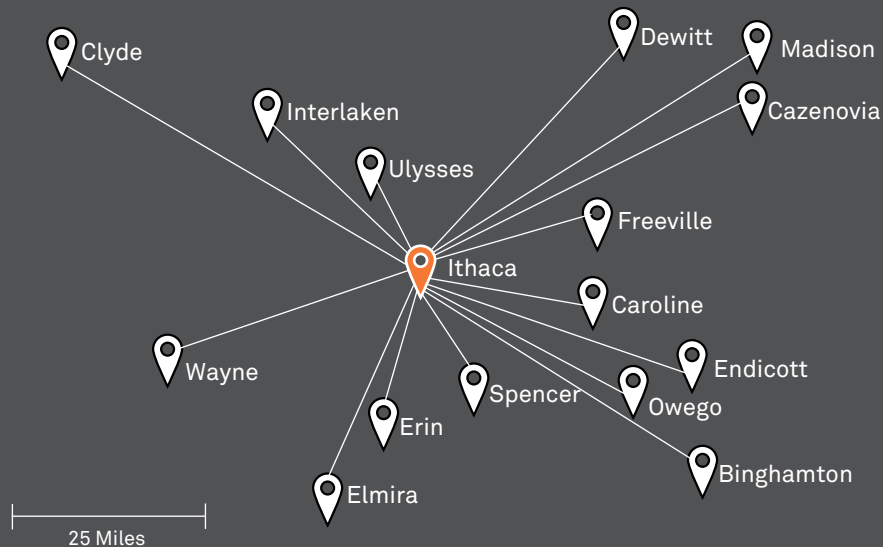


## WHAT: SERVICES AND DELIVERABLES

- Research & Analytic Reports
- Community Meeting Facilitation
- Town & Master Planning
- Conceptual Designs
- Policy & Development Studies
- Public & Nonprofit Strategy
- Planning & Zoning Proposals

## WHERE WE WORK

DesignConnect is committed to working locally. We partner with communities near Ithaca, NY in order to ensure students can interact with communities frequently.



## WHAT WE'VE DONE

2009: YEAR ONE	28	3	5
2010: YEAR TWO	51	5	10
2011: YEAR THREE	74	12	12
2012: YEAR FOUR	62	8	8
2013: YEAR FIVE	76	7	7
	Students	Communities	Projects

## THE FIRST FIVE YEARS: OUR IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

**8,200**

Student participants have collectively volunteered over 8,200 hours of service

**291**

DesignConnect has engaged 291 students, including current participants

**41:18**

DesignConnect has completed 41 total projects in 18 different local communities

**16**

DesignConnect has incorporated students and faculty from 16 disciplines\*

\*City and Regional Planning, Architecture, Design and Environmental Analysis, Real Estate, Business, Landscape Architecture, English, Engineering, Art, Sociology, Human Development, Policy Analysis & Management, Government, Agricultural Sciences, Historic Preservation, Public Administration.



**“Not to diminish anything that students learn in classrooms, but **there are certain real-world learning experiences that just can’t be replicated in the classroom, and DesignConnect adds that additional layer to education.****

**I think students who participate come out better prepared with skills that employers are looking for, and talking about the experience makes employers immediately aware of your values.”**

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“I’d always been fascinated by big cities and the complexity that comes along with them, but being a part of DesignConnect gave me a real appreciation for rural areas and the challenges that people face outside of cities. Gaining an understanding of those types of problems really impacted my approach to design and planning, and without DesignConnect I would have never gone in that direction.”



**Gregory Kelly**

**DesignConnect 2010-2011  
Participant & Board Member**

**Current Position:  
Strategic Planning Analyst  
NYC Housing, Preservation  
and Development**



# CASE STUDIES





## LAND-USE MEDIATION WAYNE, NY

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The Town of Wayne is a municipality in Steuben County NY, 45 miles west of Ithaca. Wayne is unique in that it is both a bedroom community for the nearby city of Corning and a popular summertime getaway because of its location between two prominent lakes, Keuka and Waneta. Due to its geography and socio-economic makeup, Wayne presents designers and planners with a diverse set of challenges.

Wayne's town supervisor Steve Butchko, along with the chairman of the planning board, Glenn Neu, approached Design Connect in early 2010 seeking help with the mediation of a contentious change to the town's land use regulations. Butchko and Neu were seeking help specifically with the land use regulations around a mobile home park called Crooked Lake Court, just off the shore of Keuka Lake.

Under the existing land use regulations, Crooked Lake Court was exceeding the limit for housing density. There was ample open space for re-developing and bringing Crooked Lake Court within the allowed limits but many of the residents of Crooked Lake Court did not agree with the town's vision for their subdivision. Negotiations between the town and the residents of Crooked Lake Court had come to a halt. DesignConnect was brought in as a neutral mediator to help develop a subdivision plan that worked for both the town and Crooked Lake residents.

DesignConnect began the project by assessing the state of negotiations between the town and Crooked Lake Court residents and understand their positions. Based on that assessment, the organization formed a team of students who had the skills and experience to lead negotiations between the town and the residents and develop a subdivision plan that met the needs of each party. This work was planned to be completed in a single semester, approximately 17 weeks.



The DesignConnect team began by working closely with community members. The team led five public meetings with Crooked Lake Court to ensure they fully understood residents' vision and concerns, and helped them reach consensus on how to proceed with developing new land use regulations. After compiling and analyzing everything they heard, the team translated the residents' decisions into new subdivision recommendations for the town.

The team's final document included a map that detailed how development should occur on the site in the future, along with specific development guidelines for how structures could best conform to Wayne's comprehensive plan. The end result was a subdivision plan that met the needs of both the residents and the town, which was put into action soon after.

The following year the town of Wayne reached out to DesignConnect again, this time looking for more in-depth help revising its land use regulations. After scoping out the project and speaking with community representatives, DesignConnect realized the project was larger than a single team could take on in one semester, so they partnered up with a professor in Cornell's Department of City and Regional Planning to conduct a workshop based around developing a new set of land use regulations for the Town of Wayne.

The workshop was conducted in the fall semester of 2012 and engaged an entire class of masters students, under the guidance of an experienced professor. By the end of the semester the students had developed a new set of land use regulations, a best practices document and a number of resources to help explain the land use regulations and make the information accessible to all residents.



Town of Wayne

After the workshop team finished, the planning board once again contacted Design Connect to flesh out one specific section of the land use regulations. Feedback from local residents led the town planning board to further develop one part of the subdivision plan with specific attention to preserving the bucolic landscape of the town and surrounding farmland. Wayne's planning board also wanted to make sure this information would be represented graphically in order to ensure that it would be easy to comprehend.

The Design Connect team began tackling this project by conducting extensive research. The team became familiar with the Town of Wayne's comprehensive plan and met with town officials to gain a better understanding of what would make these regulations easy to implement. Finally, the team user-tested their graphics with the general public to make their end result as user friendly as possible.



The outcome of the project was a 26-page report on the best practices for subdivision development. This was the final piece of the Town of Wayne's land use regulations and has allowed the Town Planning Board to move one step closer to making DesignConnect's recommendations town law. As the town's supervisor Steve Butchko said, "[Working with DesignConnect] we got more than what we'd planned for."

The end result of DesignConnect's relationship with the Town of Wayne has been a transformation of their land use regulations. The relatively small town of Wayne would have had difficulty affording this level of consulting work otherwise. DesignConnect was able to help the town accomplish their planning needs without exhausting their limited resources. Moreover, the work done by DesignConnect was produced with significant public engagement, involving all the key stakeholders in the community, something that many professional firms might not take the time to do.

The partnership with the Town of Wayne has also had an impact on the education of many of the team members. Multiple students leveraged their experiences and contributions to the project to receive internships, while others have reported that discussing the experience in interviews has been extremely beneficial to highlight both their technical skills and leadership in public engagement. Most importantly, all of the students involved were given the opportunity to experience first-hand how planning happens in the real world. This type of experiential learning cannot be replicated in the classroom and is invaluable for budding design and planning professionals.

Design Connect's relationship with the Town of Wayne has been one of mutual benefit. As the town's planning board co-chair said, at the end of the project, "The DesignConnect team was willing to go out and do their research and learn what they had to learn to provide us with a solution. I don't think we would have gotten that from an engineering firm... Whenever there's another project that we need help with, we know where to go."





**“Some version of Design Connect should live in every institution. You really see students grow up through these projects, not in terms of adolescent to adult, but in terms of how they think about and apply design, and what it means to them and how to communicate that effectively. It’s one thing to become a great designer, but it’s a whole other thing to step outside of your own head and be able engage real people in a real community.”**

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“It was really gratifying as the founder to watch students who were initially uncomfortable with public speaking come out of the semester and feel totally confident in running a community meeting. Looking back on it, I really see the change in myself as well. Design Connect was the realization of the whole reason why I wanted to become a landscape architect in the first place.”



**Jennifer Ng**

DesignConnect 2008-2010  
Co-Founder & Board Member

Current Position:  
Landscape Designer at CMG &  
Instructor at UC Berkeley





## RIVERFRONT REVIVAL ELMIRA, NY

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The Elmira Riverfront Revival was one of the first DesignConnect projects, and began when John Tinello, a citizen from the city of Elmira, reached out to the DesignConnect board to inform them that there were opportunities for design and planning projects in Elmira. Representatives from the DesignConnect board went to visit Elmira shortly thereafter and scope the projects in person. Through their visit and conversations with community members it became clear that the project the town was most excited about was the re-development of a riverfront park.

The board realized that the riverfront park redevelopment would be complex because it involved a number of interconnected issues. The site of the park included public space on Main Street at the front as well as the river front area at the back end, which presented a challenging landscape. In addition there were some historic preservation issues that couldn't be ignored. Perhaps most challenging was a giant wall that separated the park from the river, which was built because the site sits on a flood plain.

The wall was built after floods had nearly destroyed the entire town multiple times in the past. The park had actually been built on remnants of old buildings that were washed away in the 1960s, which was the last great flood before they built the massive wall. Although the river was clearly a powerful and dangerous force of nature, it also boasts class A water quality, which means it's a great asset to the community. "The river is actually quite beautiful and runs right alongside most of downtown Elmira, but you wouldn't know it from walking through the town because all you can see is a giant concrete wall," recalled one student. The project was part of a larger downtown business improvement district plan, aimed at making Elmira feel more like a welcoming place for residents, businesses and visitors.



The DesignConnect team began the project by going down to Elmira and meeting with the Mayor and talking with more people in the town to understand what could be done. The team sat down and talked with the mayor and explained that they could help initiate a process that would change the community and launch a participatory design process that could be great for his administration. The mayor became excited and agreed to work with them and helped set up two public meetings in the town.

After the first meetings the team realized that the scope of the project was too large for one semester. The team and the community agreed to extend the project for an additional semester and make the project a yearlong process. During the first semester the team collected community input and then gave a presentation at a large public information session. Then the team used all the information they gathered to generate a tool kit that included models, drawings and different design options for the community to work through.



Next, the team ran a community meeting to engage local residents and business owners in order to understand what they wanted to see done to the riverfront park. After that, they worked together and generated three design proposals and presented them to the community at large to make sure they had understood what they wanted to see happen to the park.

Throughout the community engagement process the team was building contacts with local community leaders and helped them organize the community and even connected them with local banks to talk about investing in the project. The team's approach

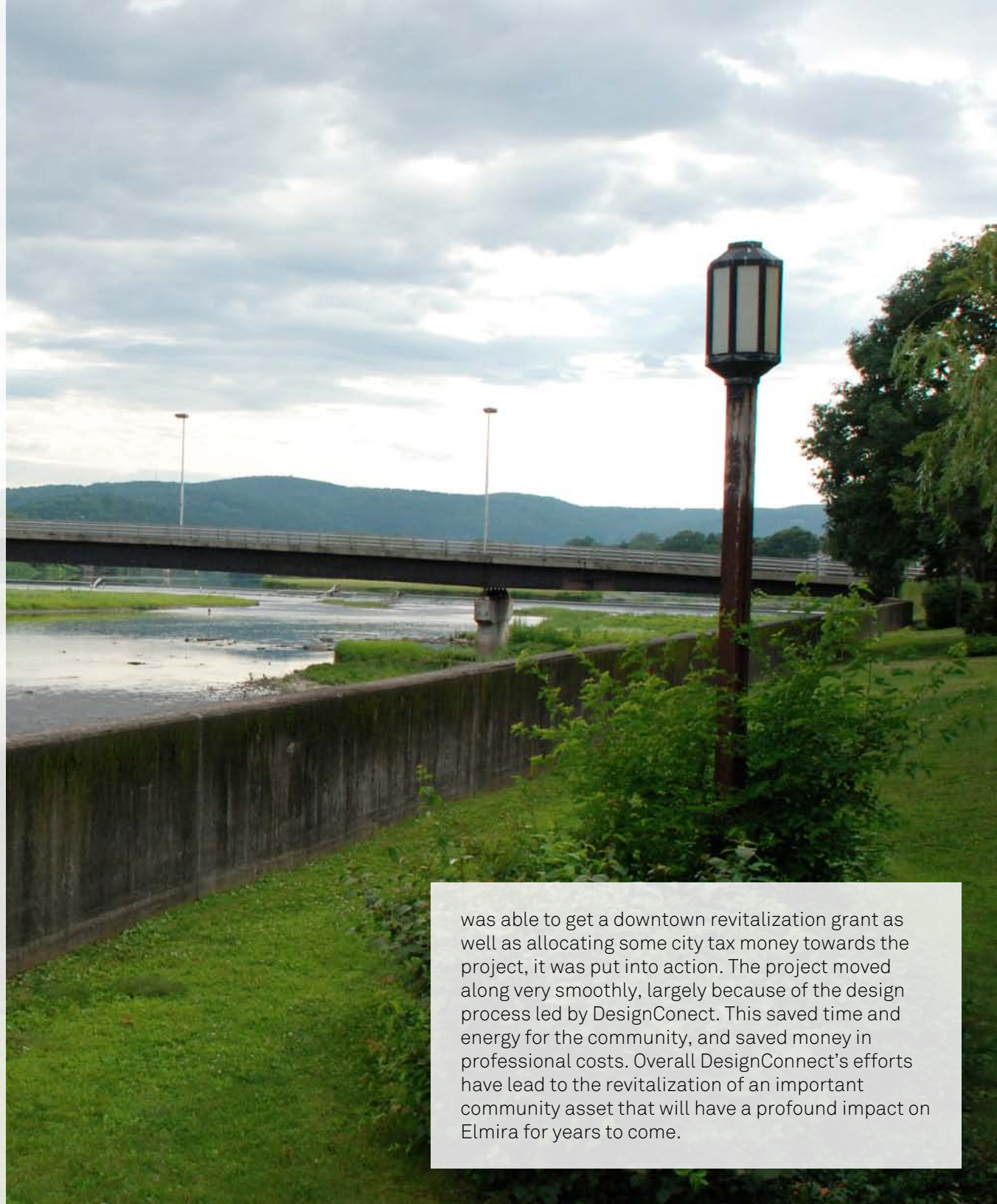


focused on empowering local community leaders to take the project on themselves. “We did a lot of simple things,” reflects Chris Hardy, one of the team members, “For example we helped create an email list so the community leaders we were working with could reach out to lots of people. We also helped organize meetings that functioned as an opportunity for everyone to come together and talk about the project in one place at one time.” A big part of what the team was doing was simple facilitation, but it had a real impact on the project because they were able to be a catalyst and build momentum for the project from within the community.

At the end of the first semester, the team delivered a report that documented their progress and included a number of other resources. The report outlined their process, their design studies, and a detailed phasing of how to move forward with the project under various budget restraints. This budget section explained what the town could do with \$5,000, \$20,000, and \$100,000. In addition it included timelines for each option as well as lists of the people that they would need to connect with, such as structural engineers to replace walls, landscape architects for the design, accountants to manage the budget, etc.

“I think it was really helpful for them to have those numbers,” Hardy said, “It allowed the community leaders to approach the city and say ‘We know you don’t have \$100,000 to spend, but do you have \$20,000? And look, here is what you can do for \$20,000 and here is the plan of how to do it and a timeline for how it will get done and a list of who we’ll need to reach out to.’ In turn the city feels like they can actually do something real and have a plan already fleshed out for how to go about the process.”

In the second semester the team took the final report to the next level and delivered a final plan. They worked out in detail the proposals they had included in the first report and narrowed them down to one option that they determined was the best based on feasibility, cost and what the community desired. They also had the help of professional mentors who worked with them during that process to figure out what would be the most realistic options for the town. Eventually, after the city



was able to get a downtown revitalization grant as well as allocating some city tax money towards the project, it was put into action. The project moved along very smoothly, largely because of the design process led by DesignConect. This saved time and energy for the community, and saved money in professional costs. Overall DesignConnect’s efforts have lead to the revitalization of an important community asset that will have a profound impact on Elmira for years to come.

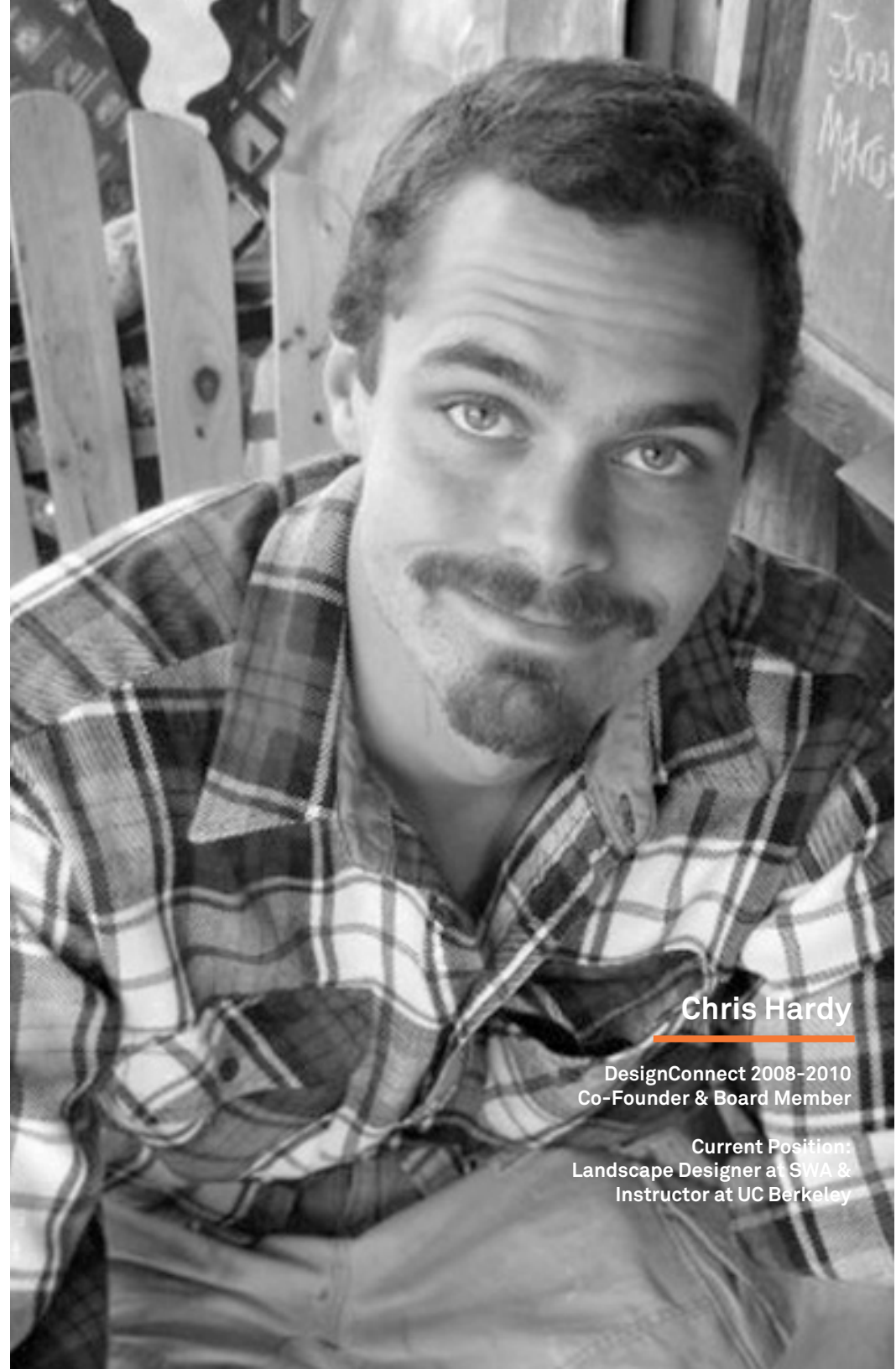


**“The value of DesignConnect is that students are dealing with real world issues, which take on a much greater degree of importance than a purely academic exercise ever could.**

**Diving into that reality and getting into the messy issues of dealing with communities as fast as you can is invaluable to becoming a professional and provides great opportunities for leadership development.”**

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“I think leading community design meetings for me was probably the most impactful thing. It can be an intimidating experience but it can also be a very rewarding experience. I found it was something that I had an affinity towards and seemed to work well for me and so it's influenced my career, and is already becoming a professional focus.”



**Chris Hardy**

DesignConnect 2008-2010  
Co-Founder & Board Member

Current Position:  
Landscape Designer at SWA &  
Instructor at UC Berkeley





## GATEWAY PARK OWEGO, NY

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Owego is a small town in Tioga county NY, about 30 miles south of Ithaca. Owego sits on the banks of the Susquehanna River, a natural resource that is both a great asset and simultaneously a potential threat to the town. In early 2000, the river overflowed and destroyed two building, leaving a gap on Main Street. In response, the Historic Owego Marketplace (HOM), a local community group, purchased the property with the intent to redevelop it as a resource for the community.

The first phase of this project was the development and construction of a river walk, which ran behind the buildings on Main Street and connected two parks at either end. The now vacant property that HOM purchased was situated exactly halfway between the two parks. Not only did the property offer excellent views of the river, it also provided pedestrian access to the river walk and a prominent space on Main Street between two thriving businesses. HOM recognized the potential to use the site to create a communal destination point and meeting place for Owego residents.

In late 2010, the HOM submitted a DesignConnect proposal seeking assistance in developing a plan and design for the site as well as help facilitating a process that would best engage the community. Although the location was ideal in that it provided a number of benefits, the site also presented a number of challenges that the team needed to address. After conducting initial background research and site visits, the team organized a community meeting to gather input and perspectives from residents and local stakeholders. They learned that residents were concerned the site was becoming a hub for vandalism and criminal activity. Local business owners also expressed anxiety towards the negative impacts they believed the site was having on their businesses

and the local economy as a whole. The team also gathered information from community leaders, local government officials, and numerous residents. In addition, as the team learned more about the flooding that caused the initial damage to the site they realized the design for the space would need to withstand substantial flooding.

As the project got underway, DesignConnect began by engaging the community in discussion. Lisa Curatolo of the Gateway Community Park Committee reflected on the experience saying that “DesignConnect did a great job of gathering lots of valuable information by bringing together people from throughout the community and getting them to give input on what should be in the space.”



Through a series of public meetings as well as discussions with the board of the HOM, the board of the Gateway Community Park Committee and several local community leaders, consensus was reached that half the property should be developed as a multi-use event space at street-level to provide an area for farmers markets, group gatherings and local events. The other half was to be developed as a park connecting the multi-use space to the river walk below.

The team played a key role during the process that led to this decision. The team helped to facilitate discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of various proposed plans, and provided technical expertise by answering questions about the feasibility



of building various types of structures on the site. The team's combined knowledge in landscape architecture, environmental psychology, regional planning and architectural design allowed them to provide useful information to community members during the process of decision making.

After information gathering in the community and background research, the DesignConnect team devised three design options for the multi-use event space and park. The team paid close attention to the history of the town and the type of buildings and parks surrounding it and took into account the use of local materials as well as building systems that would be resilient in a flood. After receiving feedback and input from professional mentors, the team returned to Owego to lead another community meeting. At this public meeting the team presented three options for the design of the space, including materials and costs estimates.

"I think DesignConnect really helped show everyone all the different possibilities and helped show the community that although the site wasn't very large, it was still a very usable space that could be utilized on a daily basis for the whole community as well as visitors and businesses," said Lisa Curatola. After presenting the three options, the team broke up the attendees into small groups and led an exercise to elicit detailed feedback on aspects of the three design options that they liked and disliked and gather feedback on what the residents thought would work best given their local knowledge.

Using all the feedback they received the team then produced a final design for the community including 3-D models, renderings, elevations, site plans, and material specifications. With help from the Gateway Community Park Committee the team helped formulate a fundraising initiative for the construction fees of the park and produced posters for the group to use as visuals to help raise money. Ultimately, the money needed was raised both through fundraising and matching grants from local organizations. The park was completed a little over two years after DesignConnect became involved and is now described as a huge asset to the community.



# WE WANT TO WORK WITH YOU!

Whether you are a student, faculty member,  
community representative, or local resident,  
please don't hesitate to reach out to us.

We'd love to hear from you!

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**[designconnectcornell@gmail.com](mailto:designconnectcornell@gmail.com)**





# ENGAGED LEARNING+ RESEARCH

This report was made possible by the generous support of Engaged Learning + Research, a center at Cornell designed to advance academic service-learning, community-based research, and public scholarship across the university. Engaged Learning + Research seeks to prepare future generations to be creative, collaborative, and critically reflective leaders in their professional lives and in their own communities.