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ACADEMIA SHINES A LIGHT ON URBAN PLANNING

WRITTEN BY FELISA ROGERS

A University of Oregon program pairs students and real urban planning.

Jan Pecenka

This is why people hate bike lanes," Marc Schlossberg yelled over his shoulder while riding a bike lane on E. 13th Ave., in Eugene. Schlossberg and a city planner from Redmond, Scott Woodford, were sandwiched between two lanes of traffic—a lumbering bus to the left, and a pack of sedans vying for territory in a turn lane to their right.

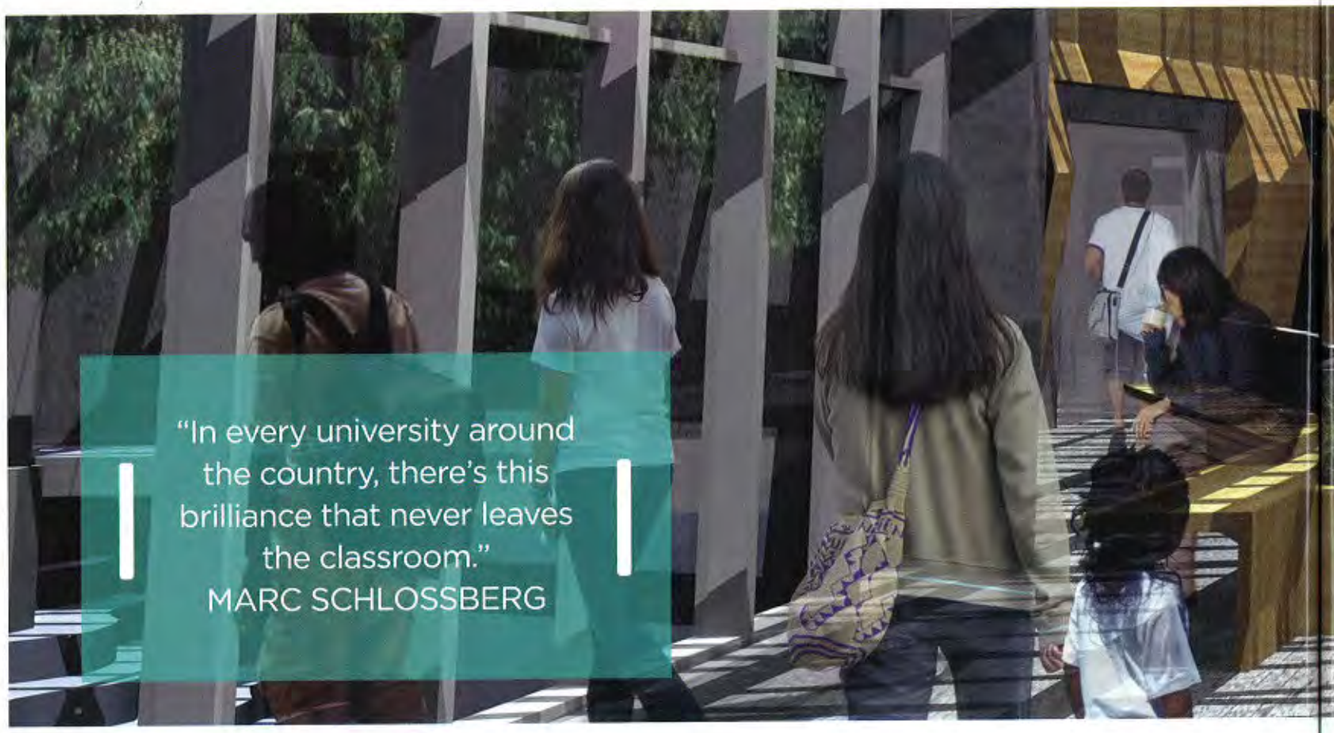
"Only 7 percent of people feel comfortable in a bike lane," remarked Schlossberg, who earned a doctorate in urban, technological and environmental planning from the University of Michigan. He has long advocated safer and more appealing alternatives—such as the spacious two-lane bike thoroughfare that runs along Eugene's Alder Street, replete with a parking strip that protects cyclists from street traffic. Schlossberg's students at the University of Oregon conceived and designed the innovative configuration.

In 2009, Schlossberg, architecture professor Nico Larco, and a group of like-minded colleagues formed the Sustainable Cities Initiative (SCI) to bring student ideas into sustainable planning on a massive, indeed, international scale. One street at a time, this multidisciplinary team of future architects, environmental scientists, engineers, urban planners, geographers and social policy specialists is researching and redesigning a better world.

"In every university around the country, there's this brilliance that never leaves the walls of the classroom," Schlossberg said. He and his colleagues hope to change that.

Under the umbrella of SCI is its Sustainable Cities Year Program (SCYP). As part of the SCYP, University of Oregon classes across diverse disciplines partner with a city to solve problems and improve existing parks, public buildings and communities. Over the course of a year, about 500 students devote tens of thousands of hours to help the city achieve a higher degree of economic, communal and environmental sustainability.

In its six-year tenure, SCYP has partnered with Salem, Gresham, Medford, Springfield, Lane Transit District, and now, Redmond. Students have designed bike trails and street lamps, re-imagined vacant lots, created development plans to revitalize neighborhoods, and lent their expertise to hundreds of other real world projects.



"In every university around the country, there's this brilliance that never leaves the classroom."
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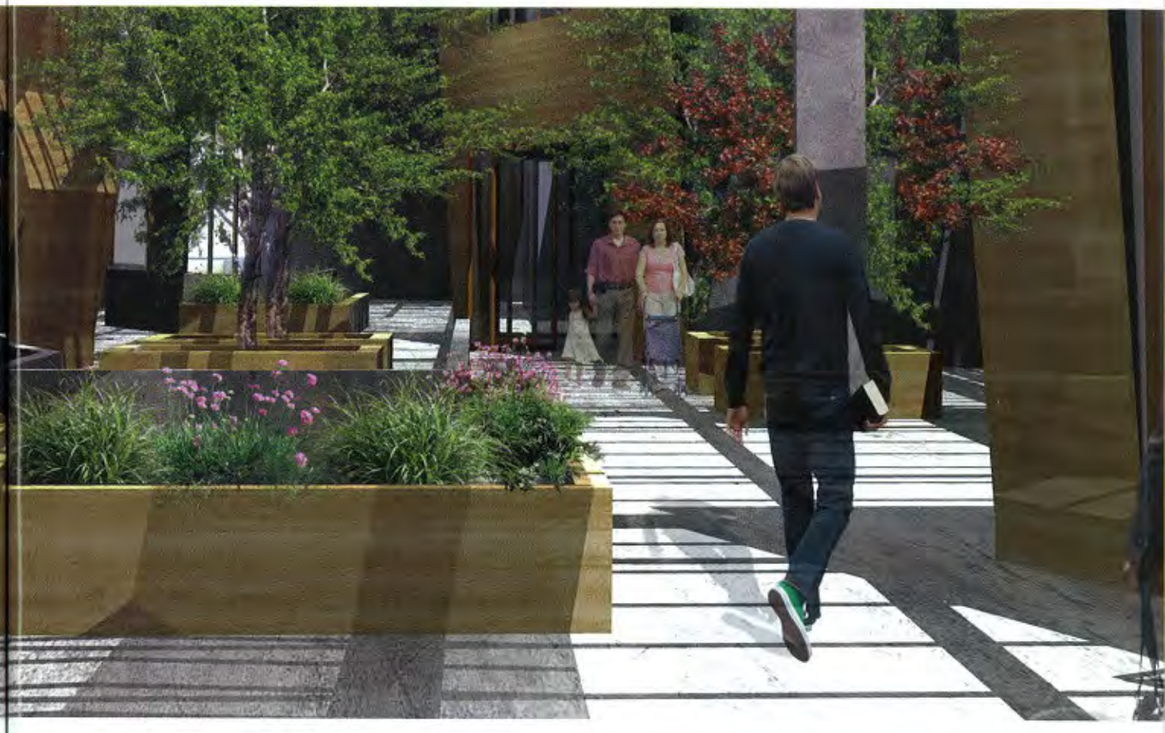

Engaging students in real world projects is, in itself, not a novel idea. What sets SCYP apart is the scope and cohesiveness of the project. Bringing academic expertise across industries into focus on one city promotes interdisciplinary learning that leads to real environmental and economic change. This model can be applied to any school. In fact, twenty institutions, including The Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, have modeled programs on SCYP. In educational circles, people have begun calling it "the Oregon plan."

Woodford and Schlossberg's bike tour of Eugene corresponds with Redmond's first project—improving its pedestrian and bicycle routes. Because Redmond's demographic skews to young families, Redmond planners are particularly interested in designing a safe environment for kids to ride and play outside. As Schlossberg and Woodford continued their bike tour of Eugene, Schlossberg pointed out useful features—and flaws—in Eugene's bike and pedestrian planning.

This ride served as a primer for how to make Redmond's streets friendlier, but the real work played out in the classroom. Back in Esslinger Hall, Schlossberg, Woodford, and Redmond community development director Heather Richards convened for a question-and-answer session with students who had been studying Redmond's streets and sidewalks for seven weeks. Across the classroom, maps, videos and aerial views of the city were displayed on laptop computers. As Richards and Woodford addressed students' questions about city codes and funding, elusive real-world context unfolded before these urban planning apprentices.

After the Q&A session, students broke into groups, yet their focus remained intense. Junior Anya Vollstedt and senior Hope Tejedas looked at GoPro video footage of Redmond elementary school students navigating a precarious street curb. Vollstedt and Tejedas hope to create a safer pedestrian route by linking the school to the nearby Dry Canyon Trail.

"If we just had 'traffic calming' on these two sides, it would make crossing to the canyon much safer," Tejedas observed.

Schlossberg said the hands-on approach in the program cultivates a high level of engagement. "Students don't get enough of this type of stuff, and they're hungry for it," he said. "They don't want to wait until after they graduate to put their ideas into practice."

Students seem to agree. "It makes you want to put more effort into it," Vollstedt said. "At the beginning of this class, Professor Schlossberg told us that he didn't want to see anything but our best work—that we shouldn't turn in anything that we wouldn't be comfortable turning in professionally."

SCI co-director Larco has spent his career examining the relationship between building, urbanism and transformation. "We want to make change happen out in the world," Larco said. "We're not only interested in theoretical issues."

Even so, the application of academia brain-trust to public problems has seen its share of public failures. As Schlossberg and Larco write in *Public: A Journal of Imagining America*, "There is a long history of well-intentioned but destructive efforts of universities working on communities, but not with them, generating benefit to students, faculty, and the institution itself, but leaving little benefit to the community." To avoid this potential pitfall, SCYP works exclusively with municipalities that seek help from the program.

The strategy seems to be working. Planners from Salem and Springfield said that students bring a lot to the table. "Students are approachable," Springfield economic development analyst Courtney Griesel said about an SCYP project that required students to poll Springfield locals. "They have an energy about them, and it

TOP A glimpse of the North Downtown Waterfront redevelopment in Salem, envisioned by UO architecture student Matt Linn. BOTTOM Associate Professor Nico Larco and City of Salem community development director Vickie Woods lead students to the site of Salem's North Downtown Waterfront.

PROJECT LIST

GRESHAM

Quarry Site Analysis and Design
Architecture students proposed designs for future development of the Gresham quarry.

Climate Future Forums
Planning and public policy management students established regional climate projections to help inform policy recommendations.

SALEM

Industrial Byproduct Reuse
Business students applied industrial ecology principles to propose cost-saving techniques.

Off-Street Parking Standards
Planning students analyzed differences in land use parking standards across the nation and made policy recommendations to increase pedestrian transportation.

Minto Island Restoration
Landscape architecture students created proposals for a new interpretive trail at Minto-Brown Island Park.

SPRINGFIELD

Public Library Proposal
Architecture students developed schematic designs for a new public library, and law students drafted a financing and fundraising plan for the site.

Cultural Fieldwork in Downtown Springfield
Arts and administration students designed an app to increase visitor and resident access to background information about the city's cultural offerings.

MEDFORD

Outreach to Medford's Diverse Communities
Planning students conducted community outreach and worked with residents to help build connections with newer residents.

Connections to Bear Creek Greenway
Planning students proposed solutions for connecting greenway to Medford's city parks, trails and bicycle paths.

Encourage New Development
Planning students provided several development plans for challenging redevelopment of existing structures and properties.

Courtney Skoog

was fun for community members to engage with students ... We found out a lot more about what really matters to people."

SCI projects underway in Springfield include a reimagining of the city's bike and pedestrian routes, a proposal for a library redesign, a rain garden of native plants and urban redevelopment proposals. Students devoted 60,000 hours of creative work to these projects. "We ended up with these really innovative first blushes at complicated projects," said Griesel.

As much as the program brings tangible ideas to the table, its energy is equally infectious with city employees. "The students are so fresh and lively that it reminds a lot of us why we're in the jobs we're in," said Griesel. "We saw a lot of people get reinvigorated on projects that had been sitting on the shelf for a while and started to seem like a burden."

Redmond community development director Heather Richards described how her initial planning session with students gave her a renewed enthusiasm for her work. "I haven't had that in ten years, and I've been doing this for about twenty-five years," she said.

Richards began working with students five years ago, when Redmond city planners realized that no one was representing the youth voice at the table. The city invited teenagers from the community to join committees. Richards said the effect was immediate. Teens made relevant suggestions that shaped the city's approach to a parks planning project. "They bring in this whole new voice and energy," she said. Her department oversees eight committees for the city, and each now has a youth representative.

> "You have access to professors who are nationally and internationally renowned in what they do."
> HEATHER RICHARDS

In the upcoming 2015-2016 school year, SCYP students will tackle a diverse list of projects for Redmond, including development plans for parks, emergency preparedness and a Redmond neighborhood revitalization.

Cities considering working with SCI must first apply through a competitive process. Administrators of the year-long program then weigh applications from various municipalities. The final candidate has to be willing to cough up a sum in the range of $300,000 for the program management and administrative costs. The City of Redmond raised the money via grants and dedicated funds already attached to some of the projects in review.

"It's a leap of faith for the city to take those projects that would have been outsourced and put them into this program," Richards said, noting that the benefits far outweigh the costs in the end. "You have access to professors who are nationally and internationally renowned in what they do."

The value students bring to a project also can't be underestimated. For example, when Salem city planners asked students to design a wayfinding system of signs for Minto-Brown Island Park, students returned with a 170-page compendium, which included an assessment of the park's natural resources and recommendations for using those resources to engage the local community in sustainability projects. When students scrutinized the city's wastewater treatment facility, they recommended that the facility begin an industrial byproduct reuse program that now generates one million dollars per year in new revenue.

Four years after its SCYP year, the City of Salem continues to consult with the program. Students recently provided research and conceptual design for a proposed undercrossing in West Salem.

"Working through the SCI lens and having that opportunity allowed us to complete the work for a lower cost within a shorter time frame, and stimulated community dialogue that may not have otherwise occurred with a private architect," said project manager Annie Gorski.

One problem cities routinely encounter is stagnation from longtime stakeholders. The University of Oregon program taps motivation and creativity that is unfettered by local political agendas and city factions. Students in Robert Ribe's landscape design class at University of Oregon brought an outsider's perspective to an ambitious trail project that has been in dispute since 1903, when landscape architect John Charles Olmsted proposed that Portland build a system of interconnected parks, parkways and trails. The city adopted the plan for a forty-mile loop to circle the city, but work was soon interrupted by funding problems and two World Wars. In the 1980s, the idea was revived and expanded, but sections of the trail remain incomplete.

Ribe's students focused on closing a long-glaring gap on the east side of the loop. Although Olmsted envisioned a trail through natural parks, forest reserves, and abandoned railroad tracks, this stretch is now suburban and lacks a natural course. After in-depth analysis of the landscape, the students recommended potential routes along arterial streets, through parks and schools, and along creeks and unused public rights-of-way. The last mile is now in the hands of the regional government, which will carry it through the arduous process of public meetings, grant proposals, and, if all goes well, construction.

Today, SCI's reputation for guiding large-scale projects has taken it to the doorstep of the world's largest-scale environmental issues. In the summer of 2014, Larco traveled to China, where he conducted training on sustainable design with 200 urban planners and designers from China's planning institutes. "The work SCI is doing in research, training, and education is not just happening in and affecting Oregon," Larco said. "It is also being applied, adopted, and adapted throughout the country and the world."

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Kevin Young's (2012 Bachelor of Architecture) plans for a cogeneration facility, brewery, thermal baths and a boutique hotel. Another view of Salem's Downtown Waterfront redevelopment by UO architecture student Tim Kremer. The Booth Kelly Suite in Springfield. Jennifer Pecenka's (2012 Master of Architecture) plans for an Urban Food Hub with facilities for production, distribution and education.