



East St. Louis Action Research Project

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign College of Fine and Applied Arts



A program of sustained engagement with distressed urban areas through service learning and action research. Together with residents and community organizations in severely distressed areas, faculty and students from across the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign work on highly tangible and visible projects that address immediate and long-term needs. Since 1990, this program of mutual learning and assistance has been an important part of the growing neighborhood revitalization movement in East St. Louis, Illinois and more recently four adjacent communities: Alorton, Brooklyn, Centerville, and Washington Park. Aided by the University's instructional, research, and public service resources, ESLARP is producing results in communities where residents are mobilizing to address pressing social, economic, and environmental problems.

In Illinois, residents of East St. Louis and some adjacent communities have experienced urban distress up close and for a long time. Post-war industrial abandonment led to loss of blue-collar jobs; white households moved out in large numbers and the population reduced by over half. With shrinking tax rolls, local government has abandoned many services that are commonplace in other communities. Employed residents continue move to communities that provide these basic amenities, and population loss and distress continue.

The distress is very evident. Over half the residents live below the poverty level, and unemployment is around 30%. Almost two-thirds of the children in school are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch. Many have elevated lead levels in their blood stream that affects their ability to learn and develop. While some of the housing stock is in good condition, much of it is derelict and creates deplorable living conditions for the poorest residents. Many residents are victims of predatory lending practices that keep them from home ownership and deeper in poverty.



Despite this bleak picture, the people of East St. Louis have shown a tremendous will to address problems themselves. Many residents are actively involved in neighborhood revitalization, local churches support and often lead improvement efforts. A coalition of community organizations, the East St. Louis Community Action Network, coordinates activities among disparate organizations. These communal efforts have produced ambitious plans and tangible results: new infrastructure and housing investment; new learning and employment opportunities; increased local government accountability.



“In every encounter with our community partners I am learning something new! Where else would I get this kind of opportunity?”
 – Varkki George, ESLARP Faculty

The University of Illinois first engaged with the people of East St. Louis in 1987 at the request of state Representative Wyvetter H. Younge. Through the School of Architecture’s East St. Louis Revitalization Project, faculty and students proposed large-scale initiatives such as riverfront development and industrial and railroad redevelopment. In 1990, a neighborhood-planning course pioneered a new, collaborative approach that now characterizes ESLARP. It brought together faculty and students from different campus units, together with East St. Louis residents, in a process of mutual learning and assistance. This new relationship was cemented in 1996, by the establishment in East St. Louis of a Neighborhood Technical Assistance Center (NTAC) with a staff of community development professionals, many of whom have been ESLARP alumni. NTAC staff provide community organizations with training and technical assistance and facilitate connections with campus resources.



Today, ESLARP is a mature model for sustained University engagement. Many faculty, staff, and students have benefited from the learning and practice opportunities it provides. Our alumni, those who have been touched by the ESLARP experience, have gone on to hold leadership positions in community organizations, consulting firms, private foundations, and local government. They are making a difference in the communities they serve. For all this we are grateful to the residents of East St. Louis.



Mobilizing resources to address the root causes of urban poverty

Residents do not need to be told what is wrong in their neighborhoods, and in many cases they know how to make things better. What they often lack are the organizational and financial resources necessary to bring about change. In ESLARP projects, residents work with UIUC faculty, staff, and students to plan, finance, and implement effective solutions to pressing neighborhood problems. This involves applying a variety of community, University, and outside resources to solving the problem. This collaboration is not only about solving specific problems, but is also about enhancing the capacity of community organizations to deal with problems.



“ESLARP has provided me an alternative to traditional learning, it is an on-site classroom where I learn to interact with my peers and members of the community to make East St. Louis a safer, better place to live.”
- Amy Flairty, Senior in Landscape Architecture

Research and technical agenda set by neighborhood residents

Neighborhood residents and their community organizations set ESLARP’s action agenda. As mentioned earlier, solutions are most likely to succeed if developed by local residents rather than outsiders. ESLARP’s Neighborhood Technical Assistance Center (NTAC) facilitates connections among East St. Louis community organizations and campus resources. NTAC staff work with members of community organizations who identify problems and set goals. For certain projects, NTAC staff provide analytical and plan implementation support. On more complex long-term projects, NTAC staff identify faculty who work with students in service-learning courses or graduate theses and provide this support.

Students, faculty, and residents work together and learn from each other

Neighborhood residents and University faculty and students work together in ways that promote mutual learning and assistance. Student commitment to project completion, through repeated visits to project sites and neighborhood meetings, encourages the continued involvement of residents. At the same time, neighborhood residents teach students and faculty about the problems and their solutions in distressed communities.



“I see ESLARP affecting the lives of the residents of East St. Louis, but it has also molded me as an individual, teaching me the importance of patience, acceptance, appreciation, organization, and trust.”
- Jassen Johnson, ESLARP Research Assistant



Building Community Organizations

Building communities begins with building local capacity to develop and implement neighborhood improvements. The Emerson Park Development Corporation (EPDC) exemplifies the kind of local community organization that can make a difference. EPDC has been pursuing its neighborhood improvement agenda—based on two revitalization planning processes, one in 1990 and another in 1998—with determination and conviction. For over a decade EPDC has worked to ensure that residents of Emerson Park make the decisions and provide the leadership necessary to improve their community. The following are highlights of EPDC’s accomplishments:

Youth Build



EPDC created Youth Build in 1999 as a comprehensive youth and community development program to address several core issues facing low-income communities, such as education, housing, employment and leadership development. Unemployed young men and women who have dropped out of school and have not identified a path to a productive future enter Youth Build vocational educational program.



Youth Build provides high school dropouts with an opportunity to earn their GED. The curriculum also provides construction skills training, character and leadership skill development, course work to pass construction industry apprenticeship exams all leading to job placement, internships, military career opportunities, or continuing on in higher education. Youth Build trainees have worked on several residential rehabilitation projects in Emerson Park. They also provide service in Alorton, Brooklyn, Centreville, and Washington Park, Illinois. In 2000, this program won a Best Practice Award from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Affordable housing

The 1990 neighborhood improvement plan called for affordable single-family homes designed for families with children. EPDC “blitz-built” four such homes over two summers with UIUC volunteers. EPDC persuaded the East St. Louis Housing Authority to construct new public housing units that resemble market-rate townhouses in architectural style and density.

EPDC’s major accomplishment is Parson’s Place. Begun in 2000, Phase One contains 174 attractive duplex and triplex residential units for mixed-income families. Phase Two, initiated later in 2001 includes 250 multifamily and 40 single-family units bringing the total number of new residential units at Parson’s Place to 464. The architectural character of Parson’s Place was established by residents, with help from UIUC students and faculty, to blend with existing housing stock in Emerson Park.



Light Rail

The 1990 neighborhood improvement plan also called for economic development and job generation. EPDC, with help from UIUC students and faculty, succeeded in lobbying city officials and government agencies to route a light-rail line through Emerson Park and provide a station stop in the neighborhood. The Emerson Park Metrolink light-rail station was completed in 2001 providing residents with easier access to job opportunities on both sides of the Mississippi River.



Some ESLARP Alumni

Students touched by the ESLARP experience have gone on to hold leadership positions in community organizations, consulting firms, private foundations, and local government; they are making a difference in the communities they serve.

Eric Bosman
Urban Collage, Inc., Atlanta
Abhijeet Chavan
Urban Insight, Inc., Los Angeles

Vickie Kimmel Forby
Emerson Park Development Corporation,
East St. Louis
Kirk Goodrich
Enterprise Social Investment Corporation,
New York
Kathryn Gregory
Michael F. Kauker Associates, Wyckoff, NJ
Don Johnson
Community Development Consultants,
East St. Louis

Cathy Klump
National Training and Information Center, Chicago
Deanna Koenigs
East St. Louis Action Research Project, Champaign
Angie (Morgan) Marks
Neighborhood Housing Services of Chicago, Chicago
LaTonya Webb
Neighborhood Technical Assistance Center,
East St. Louis
Michelle Whetten
The Enterprise Foundation, New York

Mission Statement

What? ESLARP establishes and nurtures mutually enhancing partnerships between community-based organizations in distressed urban areas, and students, staff, and faculty at the University of Illinois and on other campuses. Through these innovative partnerships, ESLARP promotes the revitalization of distressed areas as well as advances the University's research, teaching, and service missions.

Why? Distressed urban areas continue to confront serious environmental, social, and economic challenges. Local government agencies in these areas are unable to deal with the particular challenges they face, and this task is increasingly being left to community-based organizations. As local residents, organization members often know how best to deal with these challenges but need technical and logistical assistance in planning and implementing their efforts. At the same time, students need richer learning opportunities than currently available to them. They must better understand the real-world relevance of the concepts and skills they are taught; they must gain a greater and deeper awareness of the diverse realities that people experience in the world.

How? ESLARP organizes technical and capacity-building assistance for community-based organizations by harnessing and leveraging the efforts of students, staff, and faculty. In the spirit of true partnership, community residents identify and prioritize tasks to be worked on, as well as the ends towards which campus efforts must be directed. Individuals from the campus learn from community residents, who have intimate and extensive knowledge of their community; in exchange for access to this knowledge, they work on projects that enhance and build community. ESLARP maintains and sustains this relationship regardless of the individuals, on campus and in the community, who might be involved at any given point.

Sample Course Offerings

ARCH371, ARCH372, ARCH373, ARCH374 Architectural Design Studios
LA236/338 Design Workshop
LIS315 Introduction to Network Information Systems
UP260 Urban Social Problems & Planning
UP378 Community Development Workshop

ESLARP Staff

Campus Staff
Vicki Eddings, Project Administrative Coordinator
Deanna Koenigs, Project Technology Coordinator
NTAC Staff
Andrew Theising, NTAC Director
Craig Miller, Community Design Specialist
LaTonya Webb, Community Planner

We're On The Web!

<http://www.eslarp.uiuc.edu>



East St. Louis Action Research Project

326 Noble Hall, 1209 S. Fourth St.
Champaign, IL 61820, USA
Campus mail code: MC-549

Phone: 217-265-0202
Fax: 217-244-9320
Email: eslarp@uiuc.edu