



## Civic Studio: Situated Studio as Method

The civic studio takes the practices of the studio and applies them to the consideration of civic life and space. The project is predicated on the assessment that civic spaces are complex sites of vitalities, problems, and opportunities that are in some way evident and connected to the visual and experiential qualities of actual space. As visual workers interested in participating in the understanding and development of culture, these sites are relevant and these workings are of great interest.

Work in the realm of civic space intersects a variety of other knowledge areas including: planning, architecture, politics, commercial development, anthropology, sociology, and geography. While studio art as a discipline has its own histories and idioms, work can begin with a minimal program of explicit outcomes. The openness of studio practice allows us to use the project as a way of defining what the project should be and to move among and between other related disciplines. Visual art can put into form complex understandings and projections about culture and human experience.

### Method

The primary aspect of our studio method is that we situate ourselves. We are experientially engaged in the particulars of the site. This works against the tendency to turn the site into a subject that we act on, and works for an understanding of our activity as an interaction; a give and take. And while we gain deep appreciation and affection for the site and people, the contact is complete enough to not become nostalgic. We get to know the area without becoming unrealistically romantic about the special values of the place. The experience of being temporarily situated is different from being in a place long-term. Our experience is somewhat artificial in that we are institutionally supported and on-site for a fixed and limited time. We work to be direct, neighborly, and helpful by being visible, deliberate and responsible in what we do. Each participant does community service work in the vicinity during the term of the project.

by Paul Wittenbraker  
for the Spark! project  
[Design and Locality](#)



[displacement](#)



[mobile unit](#)



[welcome happy sausage](#)

One of the most significant things that happens in the studio are intense and ongoing discussions about what we are doing. When engaged in situated practice everything is contingent on other things. Theoretical thinking and discussion are embedded in persistent experiences. Imagined and implemented actions are understood as consequential.

While the project is supported by the University, we work to be autonomous and deliberate in how we institute ourselves. This is primarily due to the temporary nature of each project. Each project involves the organization of a project site. So far, the projects are active for approximately 4 months and then ended. This project-based method of organization keeps the focus on action and not on institutional maintenance and structure. Each implementation is an opportunity to evolve and invent the structure relative to established and new technologies and circumstances. It also affords the participants a maximum of relevant technical experience in the structuring and production of projects. To date there have been 3 projects; Lyon street project in a 300 square foot storefront space in 1999, Bridge street project in a 900 square foot storefront space in the spring of 2003, and the Alabama street project in a 6,000 square foot industrial space in the fall of 2003. All of these were in Grand Rapids, Michigan USA.



[destocktion](#)

## Projects • Concepts

Once one starts looking at public space as material cultural form, there are many ways to go about doing work. The visible world evidences a variety of knowledge and opens up opportunities for studio investigations. Public space is plastic: We formed it and it forms us back. It is both a record of prior forming and ready to be formed anew. The studio aspires to understand the complex ways in which cultural meaning and value are mediated in civic forms. How does this interaction develop? How is this enacted?

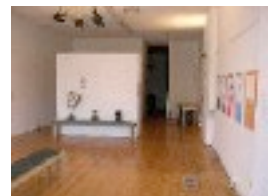
Following are descriptions of some of the conceptual approaches we've used along with sample projects. Each project title is linked to the project web page, which includes additional images and text.

### Local Knowledge

• [Local Methodologies](#) involved the investigation of local knowledge. The project was a reaction to our inclination to think that our role should be to bring knowledge to an area when it was much more valuable to reverse the roles and look for unique things we could learn. What resources and special knowledge was there? The focus narrowed to things one could make and do by hand. Five local methods of hand formed enterprise are documented in instructional posters.



[Department of Forestry](#)



[local methodologies](#)



### Local Forms and Materials

•Several projects have investigated and analyzed local materials and forms. [Those Things](#) looked at the value and understanding of objects and material goods by changing the context in which the forms existed. Items that were no longer of use to their owners were collected along with discarded items found in the project vicinity. The items were visually investigated in the studio and then formally presented on display on a platform in a gallery presentation. Images of studio investigations were displayed on the walls of the space.

3

[Parallel Forms](#) found similarities in building style, materials, and condition between our site and a site in Syracuse, NY that had similar demographic and market profiles. Both sites were also similarly proximate to the core of their downtown. Pairs of images showing the parallel forms were displayed in a gallery presentation. The project brings to mind moments of lost location, when one might operate for a few moments as if you were in one place, when you are actually in another.

[Burrito Analysis](#) is the documentation of the dissection of five burritos from establishments within five city blocks of the studio. The establishments represent a variety of cultural complexes from "authentic" mexican restaurants to a fast food format to an ethnic foods counter at the University's downtown cafeteria. Visible details of the ingredients and their packaging offer potential points of analysis and interpretation. Our problematic role as analysts is implicit. In another material interaction, [Pennant Shop Scarf](#), yarn from unusable garments at a local free clothing center was formed into a functional scarf.



### The State of Public Space

•The state of public space is assessed in the project [Modern/Vernacular](#). After reading texts that discussed the civic, commercial, and social aims of modernism we documented instances where both modern and vernacular forms were dynamically co-visible within several blocks of the studio. The images along with a discursive text in English and Spanish were placed on view in the storefront window.

Two interstate highways intersect a few blocks from the Alabama street studio. The [placement](#) project researched the space that existed prior to the construction of these roads in a detailed investigation of 6 adjacent blocks.

The [moving house](#) project documented the movement of the last house to be cleared for a parking lot. The house was moved several blocks to be used by a history organization as a museum of immigration.



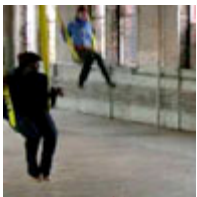
## Form and the Imagination of Civic Space

The complex interplay of community and space operates in both form and imagination. A significant component of the studio's work engages these interactions with projects that project ideas and plastic forms. [Displacement](#) followed the Placement project in conceptual and actual propositions for the spaces now occupied by the highways and industrial corridors. In the project [Stockbridge to Scale](#) an open invitation was distributed to friends and neighbors to participate in the construction of a scale model of a 4 square block area. The model was constructed using discarded material collected from that area.



[stockbridge to scale](#)

In [Swing Thing](#), a set of swings was constructed in the Alabama studio space and the public was invited to come and join in a weekend of swinging together. In [Welcome Happy Sausage](#) an exhibit of various projects was organized around the central form of an 8-foot sausage in our front window. The sausage was the culmination of the [In the Window](#) project, which collected drawings of ideas for what we should put in our window.



[swing thing](#)

In [Department of Forestry](#) we investigated the state of the urban landscape using a huge pile of wood chips to interrogate, mediate, and structure civic spaces. Forms of community gathering were designed and proposed with devices of shared warmth in [plaza ponchos](#) and the [forcefield generator](#). The [mobile unit](#) extends the studios imagination of itself and possible projects through enabling the studio to mobilize into flexible space.



[plaza poncho](#)

## Critical Reflection

Finally, the focus of some of the projects has been critical reflection on our engagement and activity. In the projected video [Campus Drive to Bridge Street](#) a studio member made a visual record of her drive from the parking lot of the rural University campus through the farmland, over the river, through the strip mall suburb, down the hill to the city which gradually gets more dense and varied. [Destocktion](#) is a companion piece to Stockbridge to Scale in which a studio member goes on a rampage destroying the model neighborhood. Using whatever he could find to wield power, he stomped and kicked, threw bricks and shoes, and swung a large cardboard tube in a frenzy of frustrated destruction. The performance resulted in a video piece with sound from the Supermario brothers video game.



[campus drive to bridge st.](#)



[forcefield generator](#)

Another work, [Etiquette](#), came out of our frustration in finding appropriate ways of engaging directly with residents. (Recent work on community-based art posit provocative critiques of the of the implications of artist engagement.)(1) Self-help books were studied for the dos and don'ts of engaging people and making friends. A process was developed and applied to 7 test cases within the neighborhood. The piece is a documentation of the process and the results.

In each of these projects experience at the site resulted in discussion, investigation, and mediation of visual material that evidenced phenomena in civic space and life. These mediations were then refined in the studio and publicly presented in display events, programs and on the internet.

Future prospects for work include finding ways to engage real problems while retaining the open-process strategies of the studio. We have a desire to do collaborative visual research in the dynamics of civic space with people from other disciplines. For instance, in Geography, Edward Soja's ideas of Third Space (lived space) (2) and effects of synekism (3) are of particular interest. More work in the realm of how public or civic space is changing in relation to dematerialized digital culture. Is the experience of actual space and digital space distinct or co-mingled, especially in the realm of imagination? A related area is the dramatic hybridization of the world of commerce into the world of culture through brand extension and the consumption of public space. These concerns are outlined in the book NoLogo (4) by Naomi Klein in which she addresses public space as a primary site of the commercial-cultural struggle. The materialized extension of group and individual imagination is driving economic growth while the traditional institutions of culture may have lost their participatory role in the formation and critique of culture. In addition to these aims the most pressing seems to be understanding the (lost or needed) skills of dialogue and discourse from which culture and civic space might be more fully designed, appreciated, critiqued, and lived.



[moving house](#)



[stockbridge to scale](#)

*The civic studio is a project of the department of art and design at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. The project is supported by the Dorothy Johnson Center for Philanthropy at GVSU.*

1. One Place after Another, Site-specific Art and Locational Identity, Miwon Kwon, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2002
2. Postmetropolis, Edward Soja, Blackwell, Oxford UK, 2000, pages 10-11
3. ibid, page 12
4. NoLogo; No Space, No Choice, No Jobs, Naomi Klein, St. Martins Press, 2000

The Civic Studio web site is available at [civicstudio.org](http://civicstudio.org).