More than 200 Participants Gathered at MSU’s BESTT to Strategize on the Future of Michigan’s Built Environment

The Built Environment Showcase - Today and Tomorrow (BESTT) brought together all the worlds of construction, landscape architecture, interior design and urban and regional planning on Thursday, October 25, 2012, at Spartan Stadium in East Lansing.

This unique event was designed to bring together the industries and professions that create the Built Environment. Its goal was to showcase the impact of the Built Environment Sector on the Michigan and U.S. economies, create opportunity for interaction between Built Environment creators and explore new public/private partnerships.

The Built Environment provides the setting for human activity, including buildings, parks, green space, neighborhoods, cities and supporting infrastructure. It is created via planning, design, construction, real estate, redevelopment, maintenance and energy. In Michigan, the Built Environment Sector has provided more than 370,000 jobs and generated more than $103 billion in direct revenue.

The event was hosted by MSU’s School of Planning, Design and Construction (SPDC) and included a breakfast discussion with remarks from MSU’s President Lou Anna Simon, and sound bites from Built Environment professionals and MSU representatives about BESTT. Then, during the main session, a Hot Topic session was held with Senior Associate Director of LPI Mark Wyckoff and Gary Heidel, the former Executive Director of the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA), co-presenting on placemaking and the Built Environment. Finally, a Forum Discussion moderated by MSU economy professor Charles Ballard rounded out the day. Panelists included Built Environment and State government representatives.

In addition, throughout the day, there were booths set up displaying different Built Environment businesses and organizations in Michigan in the areas of architecture, design, planning and construction. Each booth had representatives ready and willing to talk about their company, and business owners, professionals, educators and students alike milled around the large room and networked.

The morning began with Dr. Scott Witter, Director of SPDC and Interim Director of the Land Policy Institute, explaining to the audience that everyone involved with Built Environment speaks a different language—architects, landscapers, construction managers—but when they come together they can create a place from a space.

Michigan State University President Lou Anna Simon gave an address at the beginning of a special breakfast for VIPs. She said MSU is working towards becoming a green and eco-friendly university. President Simon emphasized the importance of getting MSU students in SPDC working on real-world projects before graduating.

“Federal money isn’t the biggest contributor,” President Simon said. “It’s business support and real student projects that move MSU forward.”

The speakers that followed offered an inside look from various stakeholders and academia about how the Built Environment Sector has impacted their work, and why BESTT is important to their organizations. The LPI’s Associate Director for Program and Operations Mary Beth Graebert started off this portion of the session by saying there are many roles for the University to play in public-private partnerships around the Built Environment. She echoed President Simon’s sentiment that bringing MSU students into new professional projects is important and not only helps them gain experience but brings new ideas to the table.
Gilbert White, a public sector consultant, discussed recent trends related to the world of land policy and design. More and more people are working from home. Young people are waiting or not getting married at all and there is a growing trend of young people living alone. White intimated that keeping Michigan dollars in the state will come down to placemaking development. He went on to say for Michigan to truly overcome its economic adversity it will have to develop property and spaces differently.

Co-owner of Mayberry Homes Karen Schroeder gave an emotional and heart-felt speech about her family business. With the economic crash in 2007-2008, her business was in jeopardy. Instead of going under, she and her husband changed their business model and began appealing to first-time homebuyers. Schroeder said because the downturn of the economy caused many skilled individuals to leave the industry, there is a “lost generation” of construction and housing workers. However, she is optimistic that her business, and other firms like hers, can adapt to the changing Built Environment.

“We are betting on a new economy,” she said. “Housing is changing and there will be a new generation of home buyers.”

Glenn Granger, the President and CEO of Granger Construction, wrapped up the session by stating that no one firm can transform a city by itself. It takes a community of people coming together to change the direction of a city.

During the main plenary, LPI’s Mark Wyckoff and former Executive Director of MSHDA Gary Heidel co-presented a Hot Topic session on “Placemaking and Its Potential Effects on the Built Environment.” The session focused on the changing roles of the Built Environment and how placemaking comes into play.

“Placemaking is the creation of unique places that people want to use, to be in, to enjoy, to be a part of, and to remember,” Wyckoff said.

A new curriculum needs to be enforced for placemaking. Wyckoff said that people, place and placemaking, economics of place, neighborhoods, streets and connections, form planning and regulation, collaborative public involvement are all important to the process of placemaking.

The Built Environment is important in placemaking. There are several key issues placemaking takes into consideration. There is a rising demand for more and different housing, including less suburban building. With a greater focus on center-like downtowns, public transit, streets and public spaces will become incredibly important.

Grand Rapids, Wyckoff said, was an example of a city with a population problem. Although the young people in Grand Rapids are needed to work downtown, they are living outside of the City’s downtown because rent is cheaper. This is a problem that could be fixed by supplying the young, talented, people with an active environment, outdoor amenities, diverse transportation and business opportunities. Nationwide, Wyckoff said there is currently a shift to urban living. Eighty-eight percent of Millennials want to live in the most dense and urban parts of a city.

Heidel from MSHDA explained the new Miplace Initiative as a way to “create more jobs, attract and retain talented workers, and raise incomes at least, in part, through targeted local and regional placemaking activities; thereby restoring prosperity in Michigan.”

In the afternoon, a Built Environment Forum discussion was led by MSU Professor Dr. Charles Ballard. This discussion featured a panel of Michigan industry and State government representatives on the current and future status of the Built Environment. The panel consisted of Andrea Brown, Executive Director of the Michigan Association of Planning; John Clark, Chairman of the Board of Clark Construction Company; Alan Cobb, Senior Vice President and Director of Design, Architecture and Sustainability at Albert Khan; Len Pilon, Workplace Strategy Leader of
Some of the key points mentioned in the discussion included the significance the panelists placed on Detroit and the spaces Detroit has to offer, the importance of collaboration and partnership within the Built Environment sector, and the “culture of a place.”

On the subject of Detroit, the panelists agreed that Michigan needs a stronger metropolitan agenda. Currently, Michigan is in a purgatory state, waiting for the new calling. No longer just a factory state, there will have to be a new kind of industry that will help Michigan’s economy. The panelists believed Detroit could be a kind of experiment in finding a cure for Michigan’s fallen economy. The City must be fixed before the rest of the state can be.

It was also stressed that it is important not to address problems through “silo” approaches—all the issues Michigan faces are relatable and no sector is alone. One way that was mentioned to counteract some of these issues is through collaboration and partnership. Some of the panelists talked about how collaboration and partnership in the Built Environment sector has positively impacted their projects, encouraging more of the same for a prosperous future.

The “culture of a place” relates to the feel, the aesthetic and the emotion of a place. Its history determines who lives in that place and who wants to live there. Culture is not just defined by nationality. For example, each household has its own culture of how life is run. This defines the aggregate “nature” of this place. The combination of these individual cultures is what creates a neighborhood, and those neighborhood cultures in turn create a city, a region and so on.

Other topics discussed included:

- Keeping the national and state-based MSU graduates from leaving Michigan, as well as international students.
- Building/rebuilding places in the state that are attractive to the young and talented generation.
- Educating/training the next generation of Built Environment professionals in the wake of the economic recession.
- Professionals collaborating with each other using placemaking and social equity to create an improved Built Environment.
- Compromising is essential, not just among professionals, but among community members, in placemaking.

The floor was also opened to the audience early on for questions and participation to help set the stage for a brighter future for this sector.

The Hot Topic presentation is available for download. Additional information about the event is available at BESTT.