Benton Harbor is a small (population 11,000) majority-black Michigan town with a median income below the state average. Its prosperous history is still visible in its wide downtown streets and the remaining urban-scale buildings. A rough local consensus might be that the place is in better shape than ten years ago, but still has a long way to go, especially in terms of generating a tax base.

Benton Harbor is well-located: on Lake Michigan, in the western Michigan “fruit belt,” and convenient to Chicago, other large midwestern cities, and various wineries. Arts-related renovations and enterprises, including the foundry of renowned sculptor Richard Hunt, have made a mark on downtown. A Jack Nicklaus signature golf course is projected for former industrial land north of the railroad tracks that run just north of downtown. Reasonably priced downtown housing might help area employers keep young single and married employees.

The challenges are easy to see. The good buildings downtown are scattered—“like a kid that lost a lot of his teeth.” Downtown shopping is scarce. Some call Benton Harbor a “food desert”; others put a more positive spin on it: “I’m just a grocery store away from being able to live without a car.” As now designed and managed, the wide streets intimidate pedestrians and cater to speeding cars. More downtown green spaces would be welcome, as would some kind of entryway signifying that you’re entering a special place.

The Whirlpool Corporation maintains its headquarters in Benton Harbor and gives substantial support to the nonprofit Cornerstone Alliance, which asked the studio for ideas that will help diversify Benton Harbor without gentrification. Twelve Notre Dame students participated in this studio, directed by Ron Sakal and Sallie Hood, in collaboration with Visiting Associate...
Professional Specialist Paula Bodnar and her graphic design students in the Department of Art, Art History, and Design.

Graphic design students focused on the Arts District, recognizing it as “a unique area and an opportunity to be involved in the revitalization of an amazing community.” They proposed a new and more unified way for it to present itself. This new identity would involve a color palette (drawn from existing buildings); the Trade Gothic typeface; a new name, “The Quarter”; and a capital “Q” as a visible insignia that can also serve as nickname, easily recognized symbol, and frame in which to feature examples of artists’ work. Using these components, they went on to propose designs for local-brew beer bottles, banners, the destination hotel sign, business papers, directional maps, brochures, street banners, murals, street signage, and manhole covers (see p. 47).

Architecture students proposed using the Quarter as a catalyst to spark changes in the rest of downtown. They proposed a series of public green spaces downtown connected by pedestrian-dominated and tree-lined streets and boulevards, including Main and Pipestone. Streets would be redesigned in four different ways based on their curb-to-curb width. Two of these bicycle-intensive boulevards would connect a new farmers market on the north edge of downtown with neighborhoods immediately to its south. Many of the street changes would use the extra right-of-way for bicycles, pedestrians, and greenery, while continuing ample accommodation for car traffic (see p. 52).

Within this context and emphasizing modular building systems, students designed a variety of building types with both wood and steel frames, grouped into four residential projects and three large public projects.
Crosswalk paving Proposal
A. Marier

Signage
K. Napelton

The Quarter Logo
A. Marier

Manhole Cover
A. Wechter

Downtown Benton Harbor Proposal
Studio

Downtown Benton Harbor Aerial Photo
Google Maps

Proposal for Future Development
Studio

Map Proposal
L. Rose
At Main and Water streets, students proposed three buildings with mixed uses that would fill empty lots and create a new streetscape along Main, while preserving the view of the landmark mural at the corner. The area to the northwest would be raised six feet, bringing it to the level of Main Street, so that parking for these buildings can be provided underground with less excavation. (Residential parking outside of the buildings will encourage street life.) Vendors at the back of this area could be part of the new farmers market. Apartments in the buildings would range from very small to two bedrooms. Broader sidewalks would be introduced, again taking advantage of the wide street, and the largest building would have an upper-level open-air interior courtyard (see pp. 50–51).
Third Street Mixed-Use Development
This proposed development would include 20 apartments in two L-shaped buildings, two showroom-sized commercial spaces, and 14 townhouses along Main Street—creating a solid urban anchor at Third and Main. The courtyard covers below-grade parking shared by the buildings, and would open out into the city park to the east (see p. 44).
Summit Street Townhouses
On the block between Fourth, Wall, Summit, and Jefferson, students proposed townhouses with two, three, and four bedrooms, each with an extra room that could serve as a garage or an additional bedroom as needed. They would adapt to the site's varying natural topography (see p. 53).

The Townhouses at Harbor Shores
These upscale Shingle Style three-bedroom townhouses (ranging in size from 3,200 to 6,400 square feet) would be marketed mainly as second homes and entertainment venues for Chicagoans. They would have two front faces, one facing the street and the other facing the new golf course (see p. 46).

YWCA of Berrien County and Community Recreation Center
This project, on the block between Colfax, Market, Boughton, and 8th, would accommodate the YWCA, which is moving its administration building from St. Joseph. Since the Y locates its daycare in neighborhoods, the first phase of building would be simply an office core for its administrative functions. Commercial space could be added on each side of the office core to occupy and define the corners of the block. A potential second phase would be a small convention center built alongside. A third phase would build over the office space, adding up to ten units of transitional housing for women in recovery and a similar number of market-rate units, with access to a roof garden. A city-owned recreation center is already planned for next door (see p. 52).
Benton Harbor Arts Magnet High School
This school would serve students of both performing and figurative arts, as well as provide continuing education for the wider community—partial compensation for the loss of arts instruction in the local high school. It would also fit the guidelines for Governor Granholm’s proposed 21st Century Schools Fund for small schools should that become law. The building would be adjacent to the YWCA complex and a new park. It would have an octagonal entry at the corner of 8th and Boughton. Its first floor would be built up 4-5 feet, allowing windows and light wells into the lower level. All classrooms would have outside light. Students proposed four options for the school’s appearance: Art Deco, Prairie Style, a modified 19th-century-factory style, and a more contemporary combination of stone, brick, and aluminum containing the insignia of various arts (see pp. 45–46).
Main Street Hotel
At the foot of the West Main Street bridge to St. Joseph, students proposed a double-wing 13-story hotel with a landmark central circular tower. The hotel's southern wing would have banquet halls on the first floor, overlooking the river. The first two floors would be site-built, the upper floors would be of modular construction. The hotel would occupy the northwest corner of the roughly triangular 12-acre block bounded by West Main, River, and Riverview streets. Hotel floors five and up would offer a view of the golf course; floors seven and up would have a view of Lake Michigan. On the rest of the block, commercial uses would cluster at and near the corner of West Main and Riverview. Offices with apartments above would line Riverview running south to the southern point of the block (at Riverview and River), where town houses with green space and 500 parking spaces below ground would be constructed. Pedestrian pathways would invite people to stroll through the block. At its center would be a destination indoor water park (see pp. 48–49).
Benton Harbor’s reputation and reality won’t turn around overnight, but it was a thriving small urban center 50 years ago and it can become one again over a similar span of time, if a well-thought-out plan is adopted and held to. The key to any such plan is not to squeeze out poor people, but to provide pleasant and beautiful public facilities that are available to all, whether they travel by car, bus, bicycle, or foot.
Benton Harbor Studio Participants

Clients

Tony McGhee  
Vice President Physical Development and Business Attraction, Cornerstone Alliance, Benton Harbor

Citizens of Benton Harbor

4th-year Architecture Students, School of Architecture

Tricia Bertke  
Laura Bresnahan  
Laura Casas  
Christopher DeChiaro  
Krista Dumkrieger  
Melissa Grisales  
Gregory Hansen  
Ronald Herr  
Eileen Murphy  
Kaitlin O’Brien  
Rebecca Sigman  
Sarah Starshak

4th-year Graphic Design Students, Department of Art, Art History, and Design

Mary-Catherine Flaherty  
Maria Jourdan  
Audrey Marier  
Kate Napleton  
Laura Rose  
Georgia Steenberge  
Austin Wechter

Notre Dame Faculty

Paula Bodnar  
Visiting Associate Professional Specialist, Department of Art, Art History, and Design

Sallie Hood  
Director of Design, CBC  
Associate Professor, School of Architecture;

Ron Sakal  
Executive Director, CBC; Professional Specialist, School of Architecture

Professional Consultants and Studio Reviewers

Wes Dees  
Midwest Regional Sales Manager, High Concrete Group LLC

Kevin Flaherty  
Vice President of Sales and Marketing, Genesis Homes, A Division of Champion Enterprises, Inc.

Bradford C. Grant, AIA, NOMA  
Associate Dean and Director, School of Architecture and Design, Howard University

Kenton McAndrew, P.E.  
Group Director, Construction Services, Abonmarche Engineers, Architects, Planners, Surveyors

Members of the Champion Enterprises team at the Topeka, Indiana, plant

Members of the School of Architecture Faculty, University of Notre Dame
Welcome to the Student Reflections section from the CBC studio at Notre Dame's School of Architecture. In this section, we share insights and memories from a semester-long project that brought together architecture students and community leaders. The CBC studio, under the guidance of Ron Sakal and Sallie Hood, provided a unique learning experience that combined theory and practice in urban development.

This semester, 12 of us had the chance to be a part of the CBC studio with Ron Sakal and Sallie Hood as professors. It was a completely unique experience, different from any other class we have taken so far in Notre Dame's School of Architecture. In the beginning of the semester, we were immersed in the city of Benton Harbor. Visiting the city on numerous occasions enabled us to learn not only the facts and statistics, but also the culture and atmosphere of the downtown area. Working with the Cornerstone Alliance, a nonprofit development organization, made this project really come to life for us.

One of the most difficult things about this semester was learning about and utilizing both steel and wood modular construction in our designs. At first, it seemed completely alien to us. At first, before designing anything, many of us would ask Ron or Sallie, “Can I even do this with modular housing?” After realizing the answer was almost always “Yes,” we began to recognize the design possibilities with modular construction were practically limitless.

The working environment Ron Sakal and Sallie Hood promoted felt more like an architecture firm than a classroom. We would confer regularly and had to learn to work together harmoniously in order to put together one coherent project. As Ron often said, he would just be a “fly on the wall” during these meetings. Even so, we would need his advice on most issues. At the end of the semester, it was a great feeling to know that our professors were every bit as committed to the work being done as we were.

The most important lesson we all learned from the CBC studio is the importance of creating a livable environment. There is no cookie-cutter solution for building and rebuilding communities. Each city and town has its own specific needs to be addressed in order for growth. We would recommend this studio to any student, because it really opened our eyes to issues we had not previously considered.
A 3rd Street Residential Courtyard, M. Grisales, R. Herr, S. Starshak; B 3rd Street Townhouses, S. Starshak; C 3rd Street Development Location, Studio; D 3rd Street Townhouses, S. Starshak; E 3rd Street Residential and Commercial Building, M. Grisales, R. Herr, S. Starshak; F 3rd Street Development Location, M. Grisales, R. Herr, S. Starshak; G 3rd Street Existing Condition, M. Grisales, R. Herr, S. Starshak; H 3rd Street Mixed-Use, M. Grisales, R. Herr, S. Starshak; I 3rd Street Existing Condition, Unknown; J–K 3rd Street Townhouses, S. Starshak; L 3rd Street Apartments, M. Grisales, R. Herr
Arts Magnet High School

A. Arts Magnet High School, L. Casas; B. Arts Magnet High School, L. Bresnahan; C. Arts Magnet High School, L. Casas; D. Arts Magnet High School, L. Bresnahan; E. Arts Magnet High School, R. Herr; F. Arts Magnet High School Elevation, M. Grisales; G. Arts Magnet High School Elevation, R. Herr; H. Arts Magnet High School Plan, L. Bresnahan; I-L. Arts Magnet High School Plan, L. Bresnahan, L. Casas, M. Grisales, R. Herr
Arts Magnet High School

Harbor Shores Golf Course Houses

M–N Arts Magnet High School, L. Casas; O Arts Magnet High School, M. Grisales; P Arts Magnet High School Elevation Detail, L. Casas

Graphics

A The Quarter Logo, A. Marier; B Crosswalk Paving Proposal, A. Marier; C Signage, K. Napelton; D Quarter Welcome Sign, A. Marier, L. Rose; E Billboard Advertising Proposal, M. Jourdan; F Manhole Cover, A. Wechter; G–H Map Proposal, L. Rose; I Billboard Advertising Proposal, M. Jourdan; J–K Quarter Welcome Sign, A. Marier, L. Rose; L–M Directional Sign, A. Marier, L. Rose; N Crosswalk Paving Proposal, A. Marier
Hotel

A–B Main and Water Infill Mixed-Use Building, C. DeChiaro; C Main Street Infill Mixed-Use Building, E. Murphy; D Existing Condition, C. DeChiaro; E Mixed-Use Building, C. DeChiaro; F Main Street Residential Location, Studio; G Main and Water Infill Mixed-Use Building, C. DeChiaro;
H Main Street Infill Mixed-Use Building, L. Bresnahan, E. Murphy;
I–K Main Street Infill Mixed-Use Building, L. Bresnahan, E. Murphy;
L Main Mixed-Use Building, L. Bresnahan; M Main Street Infill Mixed-Use Building, E. Murphy;
N Main Existing Condition, L. Bresnahan;
O Main Existing Condition, Unknown; P Main Street Infill Buildings Site Plan, Studio; Q Main Street Elevation, L. Bresnahan, E. Murphy
Master Plan

A–D Street Section Proposals, Studio; E Downtown Benton Harbor Proposal, Studio; F–I Master Plan Quarter Location, Studio; J Master Plan Infill and Streets, Studio; K Master Plan Bike Paths, Studio; L Master Plan Street Section, Studio; M–O Proposal for Future Development, Studio;

YWCA

A YWCA Conference-Recreation Building, C. DeChiaro, E. Murphy, R. Sigman, S. Starshak; B Recreation Center—Existing Condition, E. Murphy, R. Sigman; C Benton Harbor Recreation Center Building, E. Murphy, R. Sigman; D YWCA Site—Existing Condition, Unknown; E YWCA Conference-Recreation Building, C. DeChiaro, E. Murphy, R. Sigman, S. Starshak; F YWCA Conference-Recreation Building, C. DeChiaro, E. Murphy, R. Sigman, S. Starshak; G YWCA Site Location, Studio; H YWCA Typical Residential Floor, C. DeChiaro, S. Starshak; I YWCA Conference-Recreation Building, C. DeChiaro, E. Murphy
Summit Street Townhouses

A–G: Summit Street Townhouses, T. Bertke, K. Dumkrieger, K. O’Brien; G Summit Street Locations, Studio