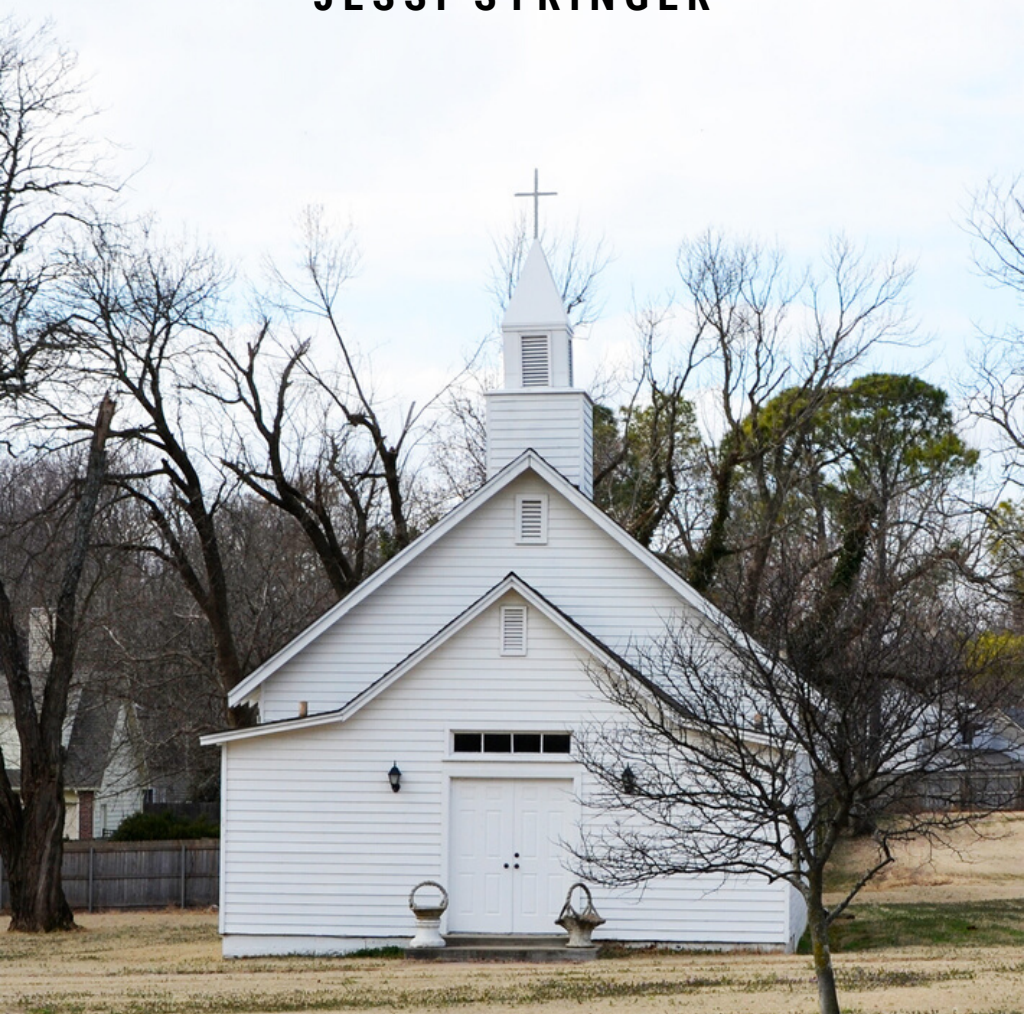


HONORING RENTIE GROVE

A PROFESSIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT

JESSI STRINGER



The University of Oklahoma
Graduate College

A Professional Project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Urban Design

By
Jessi L. Stringer
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A Professional Project approved for
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By
Shawn Schaefer, Committee Chair & Director of the OU Urban Design Studio
Dave Boeck, Associate Professor of Architecture
Charles G. Warnkin, Director of Regional and City Planning

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ON THE BENEFITS OF
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
URBAN DESIGN

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First, I want to thank my professor, adviser, and director of the Urban Design Studio, Shawn Schaefer. Your guidance, patience, humor, and stories made my days spent in class enjoyable, insightful, unforgettable, and full of laughter. I am incredibly thankful our paths crossed. You have an admirable, uncanny ability to find strengths in your students. You have pushed us to be the best version of ourselves, and educated us to become thoughtful and purposeful designers. I have had the pleasure of witnessing you succeed in the classroom, while helping craft your city for a better tomorrow. It is one of the most selfless acts of kindness I have had the honor to experience. Thank you for everything; the University of Oklahoma is lucky to have you.

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INTRODUCTION | ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Ryan Glaze and Jeffery Beyer of Jenks Public Schools, thank you for the introduction to Rentie Grove, and sharing your passion of preserving Oklahoma's history with me. I am thankful you invited me to join your schools' work alongside the stakeholders on their project. It was a moving, beneficial, and educational experience; a journey, allowing me complete my final research project.

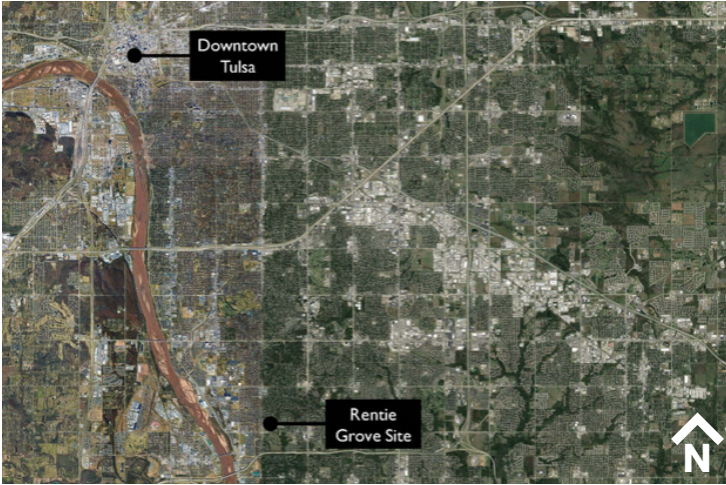
To my parents, brother, Kevin and many other dear friends, I am very grateful for your advice, patience, assistance, words of motivation, and unconditional love during the lifetime of my research project. You all were the cheerleaders I needed to finalize my research and reach the finish line. I could not have completed this process without your help.

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THANK YOU

Jessi Stringer

IN THE BEGINNING



Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020

<https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0751078,-95.8885557,20444m/data=!3m1!1e3>

The Urban Design Studio at the University of Oklahoma, Tulsa campus, is fortunate to call Tulsa, Oklahoma its home. Tulsa is filled with progressive and caring people who share the dream of physically, emotionally, and economically bettering their city. It is not uncommon for community leaders, planning activists, and other stakeholders from various independent projects around the city to reach out to the OU Urban Design Studio for assistance with their projects. This is a unique and beneficial opportunity for students to receive real-life experience in urban design as well as a chance for the public to approach the school. This graduate program also provides entities and organizations, who may not typically have other means of assistance, a chance to launch their projects by having the expertise of the students at their disposal. The OU urban design research projects begin roughly one year before students graduate. The journey of my research project began in June 2019 when leaders from Jenks East Elementary School visited the urban design studio to share their project. They inquired of the department's ability to assist with the progression of their plans. I was intrigued with the concept right away, and began working with Jenks East Elementary the week following their visit.

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Ryan Glaze, the Site Principal at Jenks East Elementary, presented to us the widely unknown, but very intriguing, history of Rentie Grove. From the information he shared, in conjunction with my own extensive research of the property over the following months, I learned a great deal of the African-American and Creek Nation settlement near the Jenks community in south Tulsa (Figure 1.1). Rentie Grove has a rich history that has been lost and uncelebrated like many other minority communities from the early 1900's. Most locals with whom I spoke had unfortunately never heard of Rentie Grove. Those who had some knowledge of the township knew very little of the area's history, and only that African-Americans had settled and established a functioning town after being emancipated in the late 1800's. I was fortunate to meet and speak with a few of the descendants of the original settlers, who were kind enough to share their stories with me. Without their shared knowledge, most of my research project would not have been possible. Today, the area is home to several single-family neighborhoods, two public schools, three cemeteries, a few commercial spaces, and an historical church that was recently converted into an art studio.

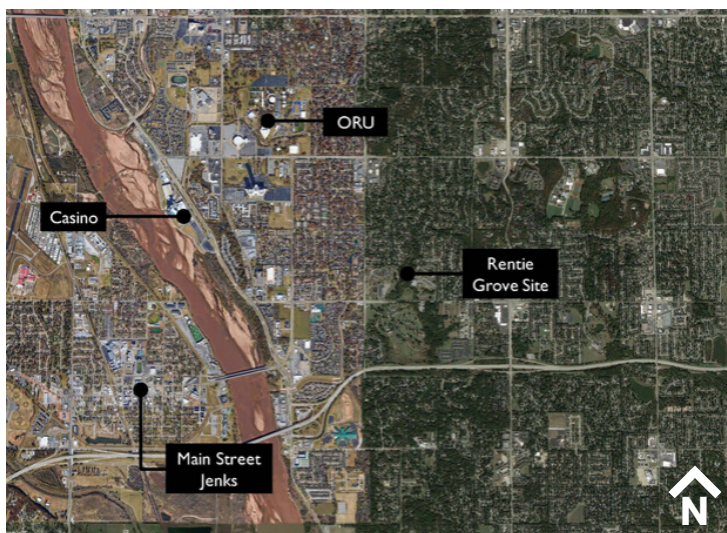


Figure 1.1

Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020

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INTRODUCTION | IN THE BEGINNING

Since the Rentie Grove settlement covers a much larger area than I referenced in this writing, I chose to research only a specific portion of the historical site (Figure 1.2). I came to this decision early into my research project based on the relationship the area had with the existing public schools and the community leaders involved with those schools. This was important because these community leaders were responsible for my introduction to this project. Another reason I chose to narrow my area of study is due to the historical significance of this particular portion (Figure 1.2) of Rentie Grove in which I will explore in a later chapter. The highlighted area of Figure 1.2 is bordered to the north by 81st street, to the south by the Creek Turnpike, to the east by S. Quebec Avenue and to the west by Harvard Avenue.



Figure 1.2

Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020

<https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0328056,-95.9364935,1808m/data=!3m1!1e3>

In the beginning of this project, it was difficult to determine the exact geographical borders defining Rentie Grove, even after extensive historical research and various discussions with the Rentie Grove descendants. Regardless, I found it more practical to focus on the narrow portion of the area highlighted in Figure 1.2. The border I created to form this highlighted area encompasses the two existing public schools, the historical Rentie Grove Baptist church, the Rentie Grove Cemetery, and the land that was once home to the original Rentie Grove schoolhouse.



Figure 1.3

Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020

<https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0751078,-95.8885557,20444m/data=!3m1!1e3>

The highlighted area north of 91st Street in Figure 1.3 is the Jenks Public School (JPS) campuses of Jenks East Elementary School (labeled JEE in Figure 1.3) and Jenks East Intermediate School (labeled JEI in Figure 1.3). Within two weeks following our initial introduction at OU, Principal Ryan Glaze of Jenks East Elementary (JEE), extended me an invitation for an upcoming Rentie Grove stakeholder meeting that was set for early July 2019, and was to be held at Jenks East Intermediate (JEI). It was during this conversation with Principal Glaze that I learned the stakeholders had been meeting regularly and discussing the future of Rentie Grove and its relationship with these two schools for several years. I acknowledged and gladly accepted the challenge ahead of me to *catch up* with the stakeholders. Prior to attending my first meeting, and with great thanks to Principal Glaze's shared history of the stakeholder group's goals, I understood both JEE and JEI wished to honor Rentie Grove's history through this project, which made the task to *catch up* seem less daunting.

Upon arriving for my first meeting and taking my seat in the JEI Library, I was anxious to learn more details of the stakeholder group's priorities and goals that Principal Glaze had previously discussed with me. After a brief introduction from the twelve attendees in the room, I took note that the majority of them were employed by JPS.

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Aside from the JPS staff, there were four additional stakeholders present. Two of the attendees were local civil engineers representing Wallace Engineering. They were prepared to present civil drawings based on material covered in a previous meeting, and I was soon to learn more of their role in the stakeholder group. The remaining two attendees were a parent and her child, a student of one of the schools.

By the end of the meeting, the ultimate goal of the stakeholders was to physically connect JEE and JEI through the heavily wooded area between the two properties. They proposed to bridge the campuses over the flowing creek through a renovated trail-system and add a low-water crossing. It seemed to me the stakeholders hoped this trail-system connection would promote a user-friendly outdoor, learning environment for the students. They discussed how this newly renovated space would allow students to spend more time outside. The intention to bring the classroom outdoors more frequently would provide students an opportunity to learn of Rentie Grove's history through signage along the trail and experience nature when walking between the schools. Additionally, to support the stakeholder group's motives to physically connect the schools through the dense woods and over the deep creek, I learned it is common for students to attend classes at both schools. This, of course, is both costly and timely, as buses are required to transport students around a portion of the square-mile block to one school, then back to the other several times a day - every, single school day. Rather than continue to fund the expenses associated with the routine cartage of students, the stakeholders decided, long before my involvement, that it would be more practical to provide students with safe walk-ability between the schools. As Figure 1.4 reveals, access between the two schools is separated by the aforementioned dense, wooded area of trees and thick underbrush as well as Vensel Creek that has a decent amount of water running through it during heavy rainfall. There is an unfinished trail extending along either side of Vensel Creek that could potentially be used to connect the schools. However, both physically and financially, the creek is a large roadblock for the stakeholders. To further complicate the dilemma of the stakeholders, the Corps of Engineers are required to be involved with any and all construction projects taking place along the creek's banks.

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Before sharing my thoughts following my first Rentie Grove stakeholder meeting, I would like to display the current condition of the trail between the two schools. Blocking the view of Vensel Creek, Figure 1.5 is one example of the density in the wooded area along the trail. Now broken and in disrepair, Figure 1.6 and Figure 1.7 are examples of the many informative signs along the trail. Clearly, the trail-system and surrounding, wooded area were once dreamed of being beautiful, and were likely used by students, teachers, and the surrounding communities, but the lack of consistent maintenance is an issue in need of address before moving forward with the stakeholder group's project.



Figure 1.4

Captured October 2019



Figure 1.6

Feb. 2020



Figure 1.5

Captured October 2019



Figure 1.7

Captured February 2020

INTRODUCTION | IN THE BEGINNING

There were two primary issues I noticed at my first stakeholder group's meeting that deeply troubled me as a designer. First, I was disappointed that the majority of the people who made up the stakeholder group were representing the same entity, JEE and JEI. I was expecting more members of the community to be present. Since the property in question between the two schools is used by the community, I strongly believed more representatives of the community should have been included in these vital discussions. Perhaps Homeowners' Association presidents from the surrounding neighborhoods, descendants of the Rentie Grove settlers, city councilors, or other impacted community leaders should have been represented, but none were present for the meeting I attended, nor would they be in attendance for the upcoming meetings, *I would later learn*.

At the time of this writing, I am still unaware if anyone affected by the proposed low-water crossing, especially parents of children attending either school, would want such a connection through the heavily wooded area. This leads me to the next troubling factor of my initial stakeholder meeting: the stakeholders skipped the community engagement phase. Discovered in a commentary with a fellow attendee at the meeting, I quickly gathered, this stakeholder group had failed to ask members of the community the necessary question, "How would the public want to use this space?" I spoke only once after the introduction portion of the meeting in which I respectfully inquired if anyone had yet to ask the students for their thoughts. The one student in attendance quickly chimed in with a list of adventurous and creative ideas. Everyone chuckled at the kind and warm energy coming from the student, but on a realistic and disheartening note, the stakeholders shuffled past my question once the laughter subsided. Once again, reaffirming my fear that the community had not been asked for their opinion. To deepen my concern, I learned through the items presented by the engineers, the design of the low-water crossing was decently well developed. I was handed a paper copy of a civil drawing of the proposed low-water crossing design and location. It was a fairly detailed, technical drawing of the crossing connecting JEE and JEI (Figure 1.7). I then learned at my initial meeting that regular communication between the stakeholder group and the Corps of Engineers had already been established, making this project feel even more rooted in its design.

INTRODUCTION | IN THE BEGINNING

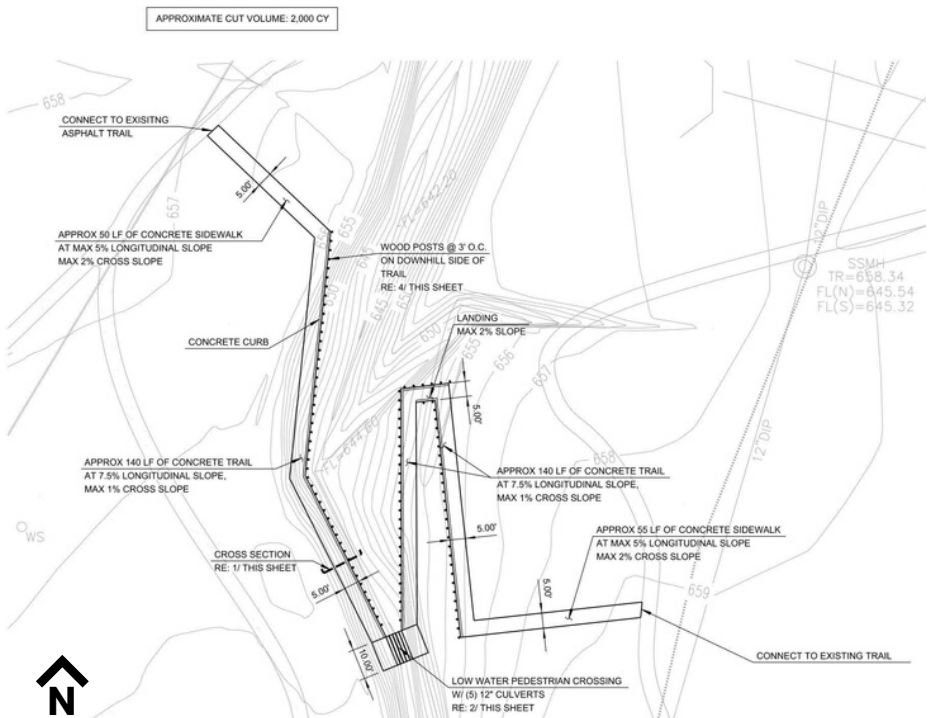


Figure 1.7

Rentie Grove low-water crossing proposal - July 2019
 Drawn by Wallace Engineering at the request of the Rentie Grove stakeholders - June 2019

Further, I discovered the main purpose of the stakeholder meeting in July 2019 was to discuss the existing budget and the needed funding to install the elaborate low-water crossing. In my opinion, the stakeholders were too far along in their design process without conversing with the unsuspecting members of the community. I think it is counterproductive to invest time and other resources into a project before consulting the individuals most affected. To avoid a wasteful dilemma, I believe a group of stakeholders should approach their project similar to the way a business owner would plan for changes in their own company. In the realm of business, for instance, before a major change is mandated, a good business owner will likely seek feedback from his/her staff in an effort to prevent blindsiding them. The acquired feedback can prove to be necessary and beneficial prior to implementing the change.

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As an example, in 2003 the CEO of International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), Sam Palmisano, was determined to redefine the values, vision, and future of IBM (Hemp and Stewart, 2011). Palmisano and his guiding coalition (who are very similar to stakeholders) did not solely discuss these important topics among themselves. Rather, they turned to the entire staff of IBM, an estimated 50,000 people, and asked the staff what they envisioned for the future of the company and how they would implement those ideas. This allowed the guiding coalition to easily weigh risks of many new ideas and imagine how they would work in reality. Palmisano reached out to the staff through the corporate's internet forum. The questionnaire had to be filled out and returned in three days or less to be reviewed (Hemp and Stewart, 2011). Further, Palmisano and the guiding coalition did not simply take the staff's advice and comments to make them *feel* included in the ideate process. Rather, the guiding coalition actively implemented the repetitive suggestions into their company's vision plan. This case is a unique example of a corporation reaching out to a large amount of people and receiving constructive feedback very quickly. This was a successful experiment on the CEO's part, and this act of IBM's community involvement approach was a defining moment in the company's later successes.

A stakeholder group would likely benefit by approaching their project very similarly to the manner IBM used to redefine their company's values, goals, and future. Working within a community is not too different from working in a business. Before community stakeholders dive into the fine details of the project too quickly, I believe it is logical for them to consult the community as a means of representing the mass vision, ideas, suggestions, etc. for the future of the area. Similar to Sam Palmisano's motive for reaching out to his staff, it's important for stakeholders to remember that the *real* community experts are the occupants living/working/playing/experiencing the soon-to-be-re-imagined atmosphere everyday. Stakeholders will likely have a healthier environment while engaging meetings if all those involved know exactly what the members of the community want, instead of arguing and guessing the desires of those members. It is more sensible to simply involve community members from the beginning of a community project that will, in turn, potentially save the stakeholders precious time and valuable resources.

INTRODUCTION | IN THE BEGINNING

After learning where the stakeholders of the Rentie Grove project stood, I left the first meeting feeling anxious to align them and encourage engagement with the residents of Rentie Grove before proceeding. In the same thought, however, I was abundantly uncertain of my role within this process, and how I could navigate the stakeholders to communicate and create transparency with the members of the community. The first meeting consisted of introductions and listening to formal discussions concerning the schools' budget. Because I was limited by a game of *catch up* regarding the status of their Rentie Grove project, I had yet to consult the stakeholders and learn their expectations of my service. I needed to know my precise role within their project. I'm confident, that in that particular moment in time, the stakeholders equally did not know their expectations of me. Further, I think many of them did not understand what an urban designer *does* for that matter. My goal before attending the next meeting was to learn exactly what they expected of my role in their project. Though I did not want to overstep my bounds and burden the stakeholders with overwhelming suggestions, I was growing eager and passionate in assisting with the celebration of Rentie Grove's history as I progressed through my research. I was also becoming increasingly excited with ideas of connecting the two schools. I knew at this point I would have a delicate balance between pursuing what was right for the community while respecting the existing stakeholder group's intentions with their project.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?



Captured September 2019

What is a community? Are you a part of one? Maybe when you hear the word *community*, you think of your closest friends. Maybe you think of the people in your church, or those of you who attend the same university. Is a community constant? Or is it constantly changing? What defines the parameters of a community? Better yet, what makes a community happy, healthy, and successful? I have a passion to learn what makes a community, *a community*. I want to fully understand what gives a community a sense of place. What helps those in a community feel a sense of belonging or pride? What can designers do to help community members consistently feel seen, heard, and understood? And, how can we develop all of these characteristics to craft a community that will thrive for years to come? Through my journey of discovery, I documented a real-life example of what an urban designer may experience while assisting a community as they grow, claim their identity, and honor their heritage. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines community as "a unified body of individuals" with similar interests or other factors that categorize them as one whole body (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

INTRODUCTION | WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

Further, a community can be an assembly or a group of people who have similar values and wish to achieve the same goal. An example of this would be a group of architects who are petitioning their local government for a policy implementation of green, building design. Those environmentally-conscious architects could define themselves as a *community* because they have similar interests and a common goal. A gentleman by the name of C.J. Galpin was the first to define the term *community* in 1915. Though people had used the term *community* prior to the 1900's, I have yet to find a clear definition of the term until Galpin used it to categorize and characterize rural areas of trade and service around a central village (Harper and Dunham 1959: 19). Following his writings, many more ideas were conceived about the term *community*, leading me to the notion that *community* can have varying definitions depending on the context surrounding the term. With regard to the Rentie Grove research project at hand, as well as most urban design projects for that matter, the term *community* is used to reference a neighborhood, suburb, or an entire town of people who live, work and/or play in the same geographical location within defined borders. The members of the community, bound by location, do not necessarily always have a common goal or interest. This lends difficulty in defining that community's values and aspirations through the eyes of a designer, who is likely attempting to engage with and learn from that community.

For example, a group of community members may feel quite passionate with regard to raising money to clean and preserve their local park, whereas other members of the same community may reveal stronger convictions for events with social gatherings, such as monthly cookouts within their neighborhood. Meanwhile, other members of the community may not express a mutual interest for either, and prefer to not be bothered. As designers, we are often working within communities of people who live in the same geographical area, but have varying and even sometimes polarizing, interests and goals, often yielding a stressful environment for those seeking change. Unfortunately, this dissension can sometimes lead to a toxic environment; preventing community members from achieving any real progress.

INTRODUCTION | WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

I believe the first step of an urban design project is to make sure you understand why you, the designer, were asked to be a part of the project in the first place. What is your role? Why did the community ask you to be a part of the stakeholder group, and what do they expect from you? Further, I believe it is imperative for urban designers to know who currently makes up the community. Do the stakeholders who invited you to assist them with their issue understand what an urban designer does, and what you can offer to them? Which additional community leaders should be invited to join the stakeholder group before moving too quickly with a project? As a designer, you may feel inclined to cling to the issues of the community, and too eagerly reveal a series of potential solutions.

Though urban designers have relevant and useful knowledge to share with a stakeholder group, guiding the group and their community closer to their end-goals can be challenging. I believe it's important for designers to initially approach stakeholder groups ready to learn; not to teach. As previously suggested, there are a multitude of questions designers should ask themselves and the stakeholders before diving into a project. It is for this reason, I believe it is beneficial to have clear, concise answers to these questions before moving too far along the project's timeline. In following these guidelines, it appears to be the greatest aid in the reduction of mistakes, setbacks, confusion, and frustration by the individuals involved.

To answer the questions above, I had to experience an urban design project with flaws, dilemmas, and unexpected changes in its vision. Because of this experience, my research project exemplifies a challenging scenario that taught me far more than I could have ever hoped for or imagined from a degree in the field of Urban Design.

INTRODUCTION | WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

The answers to the many questions I asked myself at the beginning of my research project are multi-faceted. No urban design project is like another, but the stages used to guide a community in the right direction are virtually the same. I have followed a specific, five-stage design thinking approach throughout the life of urban design projects. "*Design Thinking* is a design methodology that provides a solution-based approach to solving problems. It's extremely useful in tackling complex problems that are ill-defined or unknown..." (Dam and Tao). Herbert Simon is a Nobel Prize laureate as well as the father of the first design thinking model in 1969. In the 21st century urban designers use variations of design thinking models to achieve their goals during projects, but they seemingly all stem from the model created by Herbert Simon (Dam and Tao). The five-stage process I used for this research project derives from Simon's initial model, but fine-tuned by Stanford University, the leading university in teaching design-thinking methodologies (Dam and Tao).

Personally speaking, following the steps, as diagrammed in Figure 2.1, are vital for an urban design project's success. In past community-related projects that I have experienced, this design thinking method insured I was moving in the right direction with momentum, even when unforeseen barriers arose throughout the life of the project. These steps are intended to encourage designers and stakeholders to listen with intent to all parties involved. This in turn will better the group's chances for the project's success by helping maintain a sense of urgency throughout the project's life. Urgency is a vital characteristic in urban design projects. When stakeholders have a sense of urgency to solve their community's problems, the project's stakeholders will likely have the steadfast momentum to push forward when inevitable roadblocks arise. John Kotter, a Harvard professor who is paving the way in the world of leadership, business, and change, shares that the first step to make a change in any organization is to establish a sense of urgency (Kotter, Chapter 3, 2012). This feeling of *urgency* usually preserves forward motivation, making it difficult for the guiding coalition, or *stakeholders* with regards to this research project, to neglect necessary tasks to achieve their goals.

INTRODUCTION | WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

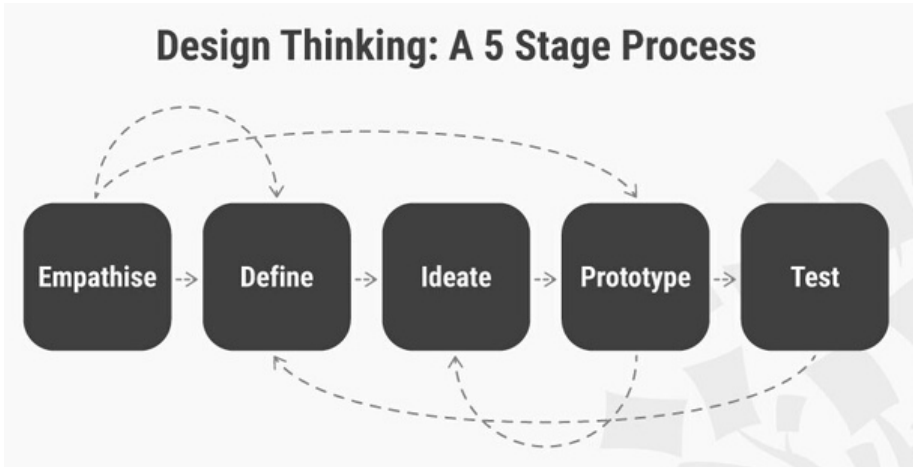


Figure 2.1

Teo Yu Siang and Interaction Design Foundation
<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/5-stages-in-the-design-thinking-process>

The design thinking processes shown in Figure 2.1 displays a series of arrows returning to a previous step. The illustration promotes the idea that stakeholders regularly reevaluate the values of the community while illuminating new ideas that will lead the project to more probable success. The methodology encourages stakeholders to return to as many steps as necessary when inevitable roadblocks arise. In regard to my particular research project with Rentie Grove, I experienced roadblocks early. Additionally, because I failed to answer vital questions at the beginning of my research project, I was caught up in the semi-chaotic energy of a stakeholder group and abandoned my routine instead of minding the structure of the design thinking model. Therefore, rather than revisit the previous step, as suggested by the model, I persevered through the roadblocks unintentionally delaying the pivot point necessary for my research project's success. The design thinking steps suggested are simple, provided both designers and stakeholder groups understand the model is not intended to suggest a linear process. It is a system of steps that encourage designers to go back as more discoveries are made throughout the project's evolution.

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The first step is to *empathize*. This means designers must deeply understand the community's wants, needs, and problems. Further, it's imperative that designers realize the information they gain from the stakeholders is merely a preview. Urban designers should reach out to the community through engagement events alongside the stakeholders to gain further knowledge of the community's desires when the project permits such actions.

Next, the designer must have a clear definition of several elements of the project. Not only should designers have a precise understanding of the existing issues and priorities of the community, but also what the stakeholders expect from the designer. Further, does the designer's idea of the community's needs parallel with that of the stakeholder group?

Until there is a clear definition of the exact needs of the community, it will be very difficult for designers and stakeholders to move forward.

The *ideate* step begins naturally after urban designers and the stakeholders with which they are working have gathered all the necessary information from the community. If in agreement, together they can begin generating ideas.

Urban designers will usually transform these ideas into visuals such as drawings, graphs, inspirational images and other interactive material that eases everyone's ability to realistically visualize the ideas. These types of visuals can be useful when anchoring the goals of the project and making the overall vision feel more tangible to the community as well as the stakeholders.

After receiving feedback from the community regarding the proposed ideas, the designer and stakeholders can create a prototype to later test with the community. The prototype serves as a typically inexpensive example of what the final product could be. The prototype is also a very respectful gesture towards the community, in my opinion. A prototype allows the community to continue to critique the elements of the final project, keeping them involved throughout and to the end of the project.

INTRODUCTION | WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

This prototype phase quickly transitions into the final step where the group can *test* the prototype with the community. An example of such a test would be to draw a bike lane on Main Street in paint-chalk before permanently painting the lane on the road. In this example, the designer and stakeholders would observe the community's response to the temporary bike lane. Based on the test's feedback, the prototype can then lead the design to production or evolve it into an entirely new concept, resulting in further or repeated testing. Likely, after a series of prototypes, multiple testing, and the potential return to previous steps in the design thinking model, the prototype will evolve into the final project. Though, on paper, the five-step design thinking model is simple, the process from one step to another is far more challenging in reality.

I learned many lessons throughout the lifetime of the Rentie Grove research project, especially when *initially* attempting to follow the flow of the design thinking model while attempting to rally the Jenks Public School stakeholders to follow along. Though my journey through the research project had not been smooth, I found substantial value in this unique experience that I could potentially share with others. I believed I was now more capable and qualified to help future urban designers, community leaders, and place-making activists better their chances of appropriately assisting in the design of happier, healthier and more successful communities.

RENTIE GROVE

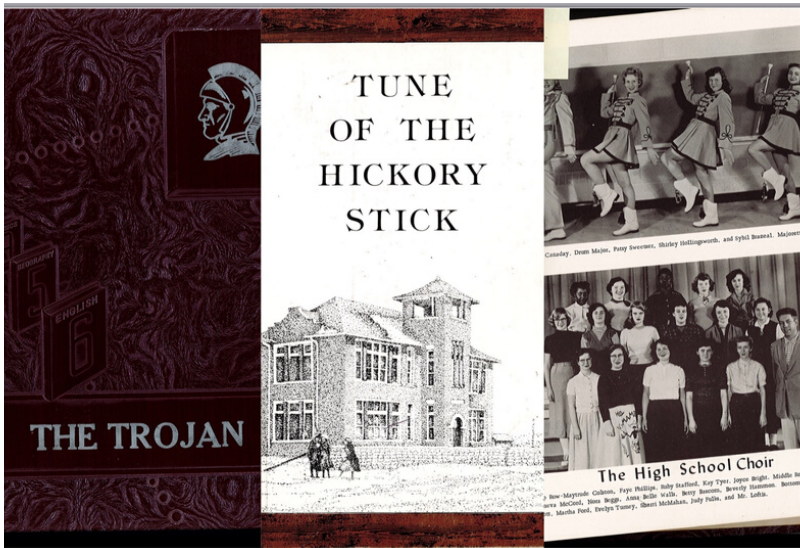


Figure 3.1

Collage by journalist, Ashley Jones

<https://medleyjones.com/2017/02/22/black-in-time-jenks-high-school/>

When I departed the first stakeholder group's meeting, I had a personal goal before attending the next meeting. I was determined to better understand my role and what was expected of me by the stakeholders. A week after attending the first stakeholder group's meeting, I met with Principal Ryan Glaze to ask what he wanted from me before the next meeting. He informed that I was to share ideas and advice if the opportunity arose in future stakeholder meetings, but until the next meeting, he wanted me to research the history of Rentie Grove. Before leaving my meeting with Principal Glaze, he loaned me a book published by Jenks Public School titled *Tune of The Hickory Stick*. I was excited to have a starting point for my historical research. I dedicated the next few weeks learning as much as I could about Rentie Grove. I wanted to understand how the area came to exist, what made it special, and why it was no longer referred to as *Rentie Grove* on a map.

RESEARCH | RENTIE GROVE

Tune of the Hickory Stick, by Joyce Elliott Nichols was written in 1983, and shared a history about Jenks Public Schools, segregation, and desegregation. The book also mentioned an African-American settlement just east of the Arkansas River near Jenks called Rentie Grove (Nichols, 1983). This is one of the few writings I have found about Rentie Grove which made historical research of the area more challenging than first expected. Nichols explains in her writing that the Rentie Grove community was settled by African-Americans in the early 1900's. The community consisted of two churches, a school, a gas station and eventually, a cemetery. However, I later learned through land record research that Rentie Grove was not settled by African-Americans, but actually African-Creeks (Tulsa County Clerk Office Land Records). Rentie Grove never incorporated, so the area was never officially a township, rather a community of African-Creeks who earned their living through agriculture, oil, and many other successful endeavors for many decades. Generally, I do not imagine people of color in the early 1900's had many rights nor opportunities to be successful due to unlawful suppression. However, tribal history reveals that the Creek slaves were made legal citizens of the tribe following the end of the Civil War, and as a result of being on the losing side of the war (Samuels, 2008). Therefore, following the end of the war, Native Americans were eventually each allotted 40 acres of land in which they formed their own tribal governments and established civilized and well-developed communities. The now freed African-Creek slaves, called *freedmen*, were also granted those same tribal allotments, representation, and benefits. (Samuels, 2008). Eli Grayson, a member of the Muskogee Creek tribe and activist for the African and Native-American people, stated in an interview for an article in Ebony magazine, "At that time, it was better to be Indian than be Black...The Blacks said, 'We'd be worse off as state Negroes than as Creek Negroes.'"(Samuels, 2008). Through Grayson's research of his own family, in addition to serving as the president of the California Creek Association, he would later share with me in a February 2020 interview that many African-Creeks of northeastern Oklahoma became prominent figures of the state.

RESEARCH | RENTIE GROVE

For example, Stephen and Luthis Rentie, two African-Creek freedmen from the late 1800's, are the known founders of Rentie Grove as well as the relatives to the founders of the more well-known Checotah settlement, Rentiesville (Latham, 1997). Figure 3.2 is a copy of the Oklahoma and Indian Territory, Dawes Census Cards for Five Civilized Tribes for Stephen Rentie.

Residence: Wagon Town: _____ **Creek Nation. Freedmen Roll.** Card No. 555
 Post Office: Wagon Field No. 599
 5557 727 218 412 176

Dawes Roll No.	NAME	Relationship to Person first named	AGE	SEX	TRIBAL ENROLLMENT		SLAVE OF	REMARKS
					Year	Town		
2192	Stephen Rentie		24	M	1890	Canadian	47	
2193	Luthis Rentie		3	M				
2194	Clara		1	F				
2195	William Walker							
2196								
2197								
2198								
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2218								
2219								
2220								

ENROLLMENT
 OF NON-INDIAN PERSONS
 APPROVED BY THE SECRETARY
 OF INTERIOR: Wagon

Charge Clerk: Wagon

Date of Application for Enrollment: Enrolled by 1890

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON REVERSE SIDE

Figure 3.2 Oklahoma and Indian Territory, Dawes Census Cards for Five Civilized Tribes <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60543/>

It is for this reason Rentie Grove is unique to Oklahoma. It was one of the few thriving settlements established by peoples of African descent that was, for the most part, respected and accepted by the surrounding settlements. As a result of additional research and interviews with descendants of the original Rentie Grove family, I have concluded that the property making up Rentie Grove was kept in the family until the mid 1970's when Nathan Walker, a descendant of the Renties, sold the land to the Jenks Public School system. Jenks Public Schools has owned and cared for the land long since.

RESEARCH | RENTIE GROVE

Today, Rentie Grove has undefined geographical borders largely because the township was never established. In Figure 3.3, the area I concluded to be Rentie Grove is not concrete due to the lack of recorded data from the early 1900's. Through meetings with community leaders and long-time residents who are very familiar with the area as well as locating the community's original school, churches, gas station and cemetery, I had gathered enough information to roughly define Rentie Grove's borders. Though farm and oil land and additional residencies likely stretched to the east and west from the area highlighted in Figure 3.3, the most dense area of the settlement is defined by the borders drawn. The highlighted area's residential, educational, and commercial density, both in the past and today, give the area its hierarchy over the more broad geographical region that likely encompassed Rentie Grove.

In urban design, geographically locating the area of focus and its borders is important when making design decisions, dealing with property ownership, and understanding where to draw the line when calculating statistical data. Though I had concluded the area of focus in Figure 3.3, I chose to be more liberal defining the geographical borders when the time came to obtain statistical data. While collecting data, I included the census tracts surrounding the previously defined area of focus that was also within the JEE and JEI school districts (Figure 3.4). I did this because the residents in those surrounding areas were people who would likely be affected by any Rentie Grove-related projects due to their proximity to the schools' site. Considering there is a daunting amount of statistical data that could be obtained for any given region, I had to know what specific questions needed to be answered so that I could narrow my search. I needed to gather data that would either support, or support an alteration of, the stakeholder's vision. Based on the information I had obtained from the first stakeholder meeting I attended, I understood the the stakeholder group's overall vision was to revive the existing trail along Vensel Creek while paying homage to the original settlers and their heritage.



Figure 3.3

Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020

<https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0328056,-95.9364935,1808m/data=!3m1!1e3>

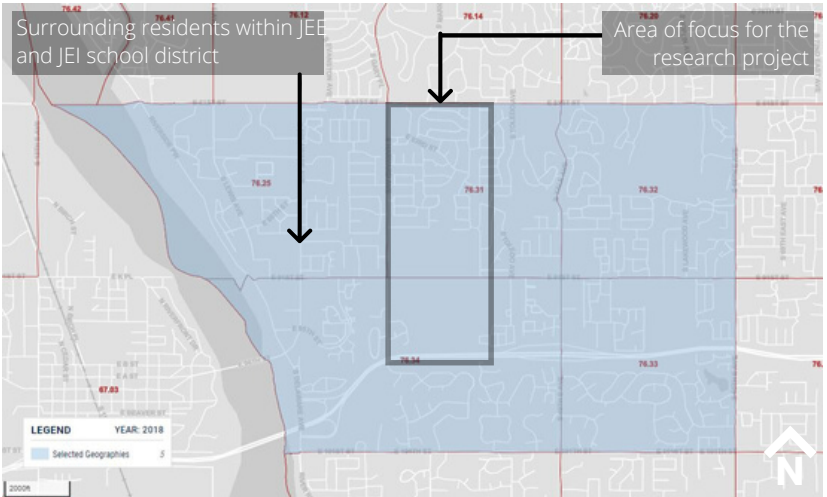


Figure 3.4 Area of census data retrieval; Rentie Grove and surrounding communities

https://data.census.gov/cedsci/map?tid=ACSST5Y2018.S0101&vintage=2018&hidePreview=false&layer=VT_2018_140_00_PY_D1&cid=S0101_C01_001E&moe=false&g=1400000US40143007631,40143007625,40143007632,40143007634,40143007633

RESEARCH | RENTIE GROVE

The vision of the stakeholders was supported by their hope for the students and surrounding community to use the trail more frequently if it were revived. One of the goals the stakeholders discussed, in addition to the construction of a low-water crossing, was to potentially connect the revived trail to the existing city sidewalks along the perimeter of the schools' properties (Figure 3.5). Their vision, hope, and goals are understandable and clear. However, I do not believe *hope* is a strong supportive argument for the probability of their vision becoming a reality. *Hope* is an important quality to have in any organization, I believe firmly, because it encourages optimism within the group. But, for the purposes of their project evolving from hopeful ideas into a reality, the stakeholders would need statistical data that supported the likeliness of their vision becoming true. The stakeholders would need statistics reflecting how frequently the trail would be used, who would use the trail, and what the users expected of their experience. There are several different methods stakeholders can gather data. Based on my own discussions with Rentie Grove community leaders, it is my opinion that the easiest and fastest way to obtain data related to what a community desires is to simply ask them. Through surveys, community engagement events, or possibly taking an informal poll in the classrooms of JEE and JEI, the stakeholders could have obtained the data they needed to answer those questions earlier in the project's life.



Figure 3.5

Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020

<https://www.google.com/maps/@36.0328056,-95.9364935,1808m/data=!3m1!1e3>

RESEARCH | RENTIE GROVE

Creating a statistical data report at the beginning of a project is important because the results can either support or alter the overall vision that, in turn, sets the tone for the remainder of the project. Because the stakeholder's vision and goals were statistically unsupported, and they had yet to reach out to the community as a data collection option, I needed to provide the next best statistical data available using the United States Census. The U.S. Census website is very useful, but it is not capable of answering complex questions such as, "who would use the trail and how frequently?" and "what would the users expect of their experience to encourage consistent usage?" I believed, however, I could create a chart of data that would give the stakeholders an estimate to answer a simplified version of the questions above: "How many students would regularly utilize the trails on the JEE and JEI campus if it were more functional?" By solely focusing on the students in the data collected, I had hoped the results would eventually motivate the stakeholders to escalate their engagement by reaching out to their own students through a survey. Regardless of the stakeholders likeliness to engage with the students on this project, I believed if the data showed a fair amount of students lived close enough to use the trail (due to its revival and connection to city sidewalks) the results would theoretically support the vision of the stakeholders. I estimated that the students who would most likely commute to school by foot, utilizing the trail regularly, were students who lived within walking-distance of the campus. *Walking-distance* in the United States is considered to be a little over one-quarter of a mile on average (Yang, 2012). Because of this, I knew I needed to calculate how many JEE and JEI students lived within a one-quarter mile radius from the campus property line. Further, I knew the statistical answer to the question would be fairly useless unless I also had other numbers to compare against the results. First, I needed to know how many students in the 6th grade or below attended JEE or JEI in the 2018-2019 school year. Next, I calculated how many of those students lived in the Rentie Grove area, regardless if they attended Jenks Public Schools, a private school, or another public school system. I estimated this number to alleviate any discrepancies in census reporting; assuming some children may transfer during the school year or were moving within school districts at the time of census data collection.

RESEARCH | RENTIE GROVE HISTORY

I then needed to estimate how many of those students only attended JEE or JEI. Finally, I calculated how many students attending JEE or JEI, lived in Rentie Grove, and also lived within walking distance of the campus (Figure 3.6). The data concluded that roughly 276 out of about 2,559 JEE or JEI students (11% of students) lived within walking-distance of the campus during the 2018-2019 school year. Whether or not 11% is a justifiable percentage to leave the vision of the stakeholders unamended, is unknown. It is up to the stakeholder group and designers to obtain additional data, then make that decision. I believe that urban designers performing similar studies should provide a follow-up survey to the community in question after completing a data report. Despite what the data suggests, it is beneficial to consult the community so you can then compare the data to additional data. Assuming students who live close to campus *always* walk to school is not a fair assumption. Assuming students who live further from campus than one-quarter of a mile *never* walk to school is also not a fair assumption. Without speaking directly with students to compare the data collected from the census, or similar method, the data is only a rough estimate that should not totally determine the stakeholder group's vision.

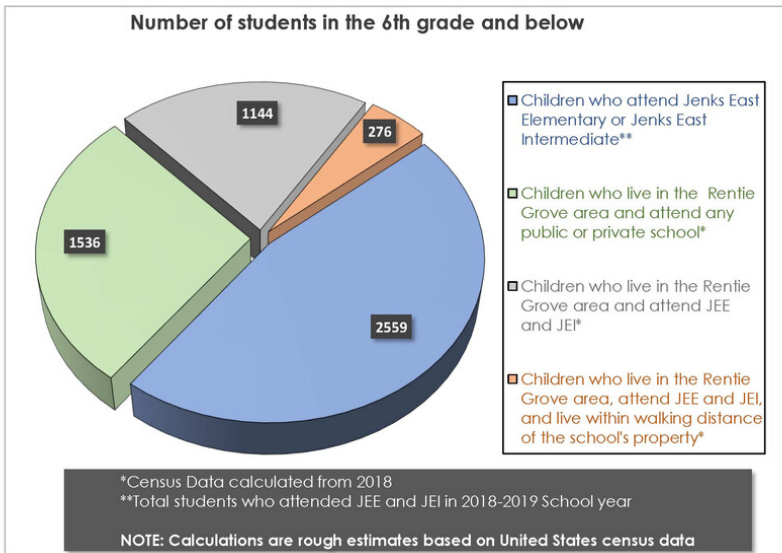


Figure 3.6 Data collection estimates for students in Rentie Grove; 2018-2019

https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?t=School%20Enrollment&tid=ACSDT5Y2018.B14002&vintage=2018&hidePreview=false&layer=VT_2018_140_00_PY_D1&cid=B14002_001E&moe=false&g=1400000US40143007631

THE PIVOT



Captured September 2019

After extensive, historical research and data collection, I was eager to attend the second stakeholder meeting and share my findings with the group. Unfortunately, the second meeting was unexpectedly reflective of the first meeting I attended. The stakeholders discussed the low water crossing logistics further. Additional engineers were also asked to join the stakeholder group. The new members offered their expertise on the landscape portion of the project regarding the deconstruction and redesign of the banks along Vensel Creek during the low-water crossing construction phase. Admittedly, it was challenging to listen to that phase of the project being discussed in extensive detail after learning the history of the African-Creeks who settled Rentie Grove. At that point, I grew even more passionate to involve the community before the design phase became evermore concrete. I had brought with me copies of my notes acquired while conducting my historical research. I also brought my statistical data report regarding the number of students who may use the trail regularly based on their residence's proximity to the campus (Figure 3.6).

RESEARCH | THE PIVOT

I had hoped by sharing my historical findings and the collected data, the stakeholders would break away from discussing the details of the low-water crossing, and lend to brainstorming on methods we could use to engage with the surrounding community. The data concluded approximately 11% of current students live within walking distance of the campus. I did not feel comfortable enough in my role to deem whether 11% of the students was a significant percentage to take further action regarding connecting the trail to the existing sidewalks. Despite the value, I believe the data I collected brought vital information to the stakeholder group; however, the statistics were never again discussed while I was in attendance. The dismissal of the acquired data made the continued, in-depth discussion of the low-water crossing appear even more premature than it had already seemed at the first meeting. Aside from not consulting the community in the first place, then dismissing the data I had collected on modern day Rentie Grove, I was equally concerned about the feasibility of revitalizing the existing trails in conjunction with the low-water crossing bridge expense. The trails alongside Vensel Creek are in desperate need of consistent maintenance. As I mentioned in the previous sections, the existing signage along the trail as well as the landscape architecture that evidently existed near the creek are all in decay, under-maintained, underutilized, and prove that an outdoor space, even when one already exists, will likely not be used by the teachers and students if it is not well-maintained.



Figure 4.1

Captured October, 2019

RESEARCH | THE PIVOT

Figure 4.1 reveals an outdoor classroom space someone had designed for the school long ago. It is adjacent to the trail, and in close proximity to the playground. It is of good design in my opinion. It is simple, yet could allow teachers who wish to educate their students outdoors the ability to create that atmosphere with ease. Nonetheless, the amount of fallen limbs, unmanaged buildup of leaves, and dilapidated sign are understandably uninviting to teachers and their students. It was not made clear while I was in attendance at the stakeholder meetings if the maintenance issues would be addressed. I remain hopeful a maintenance crew who is dedicated to the far perimeters of the campus as well as the creek will be highly considered prior to the erection of a low-water crossing and outdoor learning space. Otherwise, I believe the discussion of a new design for the area could prove wasteful. Based on my observations, I believe it would not be advantageous to install or create anything new until routine maintenance for this area of the campus is established. For example, while on one of my first site observation visits, I noticed an Up With Trees sign (Figure 4.2). Up With Trees is a non-profit organization in Tulsa whose mission is, "To beautify greater Tulsa by planting trees and to create urban forestry awareness through education." The organization will usually gift a wooden sign for the site being "beautified" and place a steel plaque beneath the tree they have planted, paying homage or tribute to a person or group (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.2

Captured February 2020



Figure 4.3

Captured February 2020

RESEARCH | THE PIVOT

In Figure 4.4, one of the thick, steel plaques under the gifted tree is completely mangled, likely by a lawnmower blade. (Figure 4.5 displays another plaque under a nearby tree that is undamaged for comparison). I frequently checked this area of the campus that was on the far edge of the playground, and despite the sharp, destroyed plaque that is accessible to students, it has yet to be removed in several months. Though I was worried for students who may journey from the playground and potentially harm themselves from the mangled plaque, I did not remove the metal from the ground during my visits. I used this observation method to determine how often the JEE and JEI maintenance team may venture out to that area of the campus. I doubt that a person paid to maintain the campus would neglectfully leave this sharp and potentially dangerous object within reach of children if they knew of its existence and physical status. Therefore, it is more likely that the maintenance team is simply not covering that area of the campus. The reason they are not maintaining certain areas of the JEE and JEI campus is unknown to me. Potentially, the team hired to perform maintenance may not have the time, money, and/or man-power to maintain certain areas of the campus due to its size. Based on my routine site visit observations, the far perimeters of the school grounds that include the existing trails, outdoor classroom space, location of the proposed low-water crossing, and the outside perimeter of the playgrounds, have essentially looked the same for over 9 months of observations. I fear that the same level of maintenance will be expected even with new design implementations if a new maintenance plan is not developed.



Figure 4.4

Captured February 2020



Figure 4.5

Captured February 2020

RESEARCH | THE PIVOT

After performing site observations, studying the history of Rentie Grove, collecting statistical data, and discussing the potential school funding issues further, I felt the best way to assist the stakeholder group at that point was to suggest a more feasible 'option B' plan. I arranged to present my suggestive new option at the third meeting I was to attend. I decided to put together a presentation board to better express my 'option B' plan in a visual format. I wanted my presentation board to display a series of place-making ideas that were implemented at other schools across the United States, so that the stakeholders may see more clearly the success that follows from starting small. I also wanted my presentation to subtly push the design thinking process I follow, and open their eyes to a new approach. My design board (Figure 4.5) was designed to encourage the stakeholders to begin with small ideas and grow from there. Instead of discussing unforeseeable, budgeting issues and attempting to design large-scale projects that we don't necessarily know the community will use or not, I thought it would be beneficial to work with what we had and observe how people used the space. Like the design thinking model suggests (Figure 2.1), it is encouraged to go back to a previous step when necessary. I believed it would be appropriate at that point in their project to create a prototype, then test how others use the space. I brainstormed, thinking the first prototype could possibly be replacing the damaged signage with new, bright markers. A solution to create a prototype of new signage while mitigating the school's budget could be to include the students in the design process, allowing them to gain some ownership and pride in the project. Potentially, each class could design, build, and install a sign together. After each class had installed their own sign throughout the space, we could then take the results to the community in the *empathize* stage as we would next seek feedback. We could ask the community how they liked our efforts and what they would change. Regardless of the solution, I expressed my belief to the stakeholder group that we step back and brainstorm simple ideas that would involve the students, parents, and/or community before taking the next step in the design thinking process; thus, hopefully resolving unanswered questions and further reducing an anxious atmosphere at the meetings. Communication and transparency with the community would also likely save the stakeholders from wasting precious time and needlessly discussing budgets in great detail.

RESEARCH | THE PIVOT

As the third stakeholder meeting began, I presented my piece to the best of my ability. The presentation was not smooth, as many stakeholders continued discussing the low-water crossing and the school budget with the superintendent in the back of the room. After I made my suggestions concerning the maintenance and signage issues along the trails, pointed out the reconsideration to pour money and time into a project that has potential to be rejected by the public, and suggested we involve the students during the *prototype* phase, I was anticipating further discussion to follow. On the contrary, the stakeholders immediately and nearly unanimously dismissed my presentation and proceeded to discuss the latest update from the Corps of Engineers. At this point I was even more confused about my role. How was I to assist these stakeholders after they rejected what I thought would be the most feasible approach to their project? Additionally, at the time of that meeting, I was on a schedule with the university to complete an urban design project before graduation, which was only six short months away.

I had an important decision to make, and for the sake of my eligibility to graduate, I knew I needed to excuse myself from the role of "glorified researcher" and transition into the role of "urban designer." It was appropriate at this point to depart from the stakeholder group and begin making progress in a new way. Besides, I did not know how much additional assistance I could offer the stakeholders, since it seemed they had a narrow vision established at this point, and my repetitive suggestions were not going to sway them with what I thought was a more successful direction.

The most valuable lesson learned at that moment was when I realized, sometimes it is better to pivot and take a slightly new approach to a project. I gave my best effort to be the designer I thought the stakeholders needed; however, approaching the end of the semester, I realized I was still at square one with too little information to present to the university due to repetitive roadblocks. To avoid losing my momentum on the Rentie Grove project, I simply redirected my energy and passion for the people of Rentie Grove.

RESEARCH | THE PIVOT

Of all the issues I observed with the project, the lack of community engagement was the most troubling. Though stakeholder groups are not required to consult the community, I believe by dismissing the ideas of the people, the stakeholders are missing out on magnificent collaboration opportunities with the people they represent, resulting in an unnecessary long road ahead. At the time of the third meeting, I knew I wanted to separate myself from the restrictions established by the stakeholder group, but also continue my attempt to help the stakeholders reach their goals. Over the next week following the last meeting I attended, I asked myself, "how can designers better understand the importance of community involvement prior to making impactful decisions for the community?" Beyond the need to complete an urban design project, so that I could fulfill the University of Oklahoma's graduation eligibility requirements, I felt an obligation to the profession of urban design to use this experience as a teaching opportunity. I wanted to help other designers facing similar issues understand the different methods in which they may subtly engage with the community, while respecting the stakeholder group with which they are working. Further, I wanted to share my experience with a variety of stakeholder groups, so they may too learn from my process. I hoped to convey the relevance of not bypassing design thinking steps, and the importance of communicating with the community. Based on the experience I had with the Rentie Grove stakeholders, I believe all community stakeholder groups would find their chances of successfully and quickly completing a project are greatly improved by following the suggested design thinking steps (Figure 2.1).

Because I have an affinity for film production, I believed the best way to share my experience and suggestions with as many designers, stakeholders, and community leaders as possible was through a film documentary. I proposed the idea to my professor that I pivot my energy towards documenting community engagement events, interviewing community leaders, and sharing my story about the Rentie Grove project through film. I shared my experience with my jury in December 2019. With fair warning from my professor and jury to quickly begin the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, they wished me luck on my revised endeavor, and I began my journey.

IRB PROCESS



Captured October 2019

I had a lot of work ahead of me, and only six months to complete the film when my documentary proposal was approved by my jury in early December 2019. Per University privacy requirements, I still needed to go through OU's proper IRB process before interviewing any of the Rentie Grove community leaders.

The Institutional Review Boards, or IRB, are responsible for reviewing research submissions that involve human subjects and assess that it adequately meets the criteria for approval set forth by the federal regulations, state law, and OU policies and procedures (University Of Oklahoma, 2020). The purpose of the IRB review is critical in protecting the rights of all parties involved with research studies. The IRB process is an essential component to any graduate work possessing the ability to serve without bias and ensuring the validity of the research. I needed to begin this process immediately, as I could not interview the community for my documentary until I received the approval letter from the IRB.

METHODOLOGY | IRB PROCESS

Realistically speaking, completing IRB forms is not a short process, but I am thankful that it is a detailed, well-reviewed series of documents. I do not believe processes that are legally protecting a student, the University of Oklahoma, or research participants should be taken lightly. I am thankful OU holds their students accountable and to a higher standard by strongly enforcing this process. This IRB process encourages students to perform their due diligence regarding the protection of their participants. The IRB also asks detailed questions that ensure the student submitting the forms knows specifically what they are doing with their project, how they are interacting with participants, and what protective measures will be established at every milestone. Before beginning the IRB process for my research project, I was confident in thinking I knew exactly what to expect and which questions I wanted to ask the interviewees for my documentary. The IRB, however, required more extensive details than I had originally anticipated. For example, the IRB not only needed to know the exact questions I would be asking during an interview, but also required the manner in which I would be asking participants for their interview.

These detailed questions forced me to think in great detail of the manner I should approach participants, what protective waivers I should ask participants to sign, and any other legal, protective measures that would ensure I am positively representing OU, all while offering protective professionalism for the sake of my willing participants. Among the many required forms the IRB asks students to complete, the most crucial to my research project were the Student as Principal Investigator form, the Initial Email and Phone Script for the interview request, the Talent Waiver for interviewees, and the Statement of Confidentiality. After verifying to the IRB that the participants would be protected through a series of forms and legal documents, I eventually received my letter of approval (Figure 5.1). I now had proper permission from the IRB, and was allowed to submit emails to the interested participants, who I felt would be an asset to the documentary.



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Expedited Review – AP01

Date: January 29, 2020

IRB#: 11576

Principal

Approval Date: 01/29/2020

Investigator: Jessi L. Stringer

Status Report Due: 12/31/2020

Study Title: Honoring Rentie Grove: An Educational Documentary on Urban Design, Community Engagement, and Modernizing the Process of Placemaking

Expedited Category: 6 & 7

Collection/Use of PHI: No

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed and granted expedited approval of the above-referenced research study. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

Requirements under the Common Rule have changed. The above-referenced research meets one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. However, as Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit an annual status report to the IRB.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Obtain informed consent and research privacy authorization using the currently approved, stamped forms and retain all original, signed forms, if applicable.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications.
- Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- **Submit an annual status report to the IRB to provide the study/recruitment status and report all harms and deviations that may have occurred.**
- **Submit a final closure report at the completion of the project.**

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.

DOCUMENTARY



Captured February 2020

Because my IRB approval letter was posted in late January 2020, I had roughly 3 months remaining in which to contact potential participants, conduct and film their interviews, and transcribe, edit, and cut the footage into a documentary. Before ever reaching out to participants, I created an outline for the documentary that would determine which community leaders I would request to interview. The first topic I wanted to cover in the film was *urban design*, so that the audience would understand my angle, as an urban designer, for the remainder of the film. I asked local architect, urban designer, and director of the Urban Design Studio at the University of Oklahoma, Shawn Schaefer, to share his knowledge on the subject and give advice to the audience who may themselves be participating in a community-related project. Next, I wanted the documentary to display the needs of the community leaders associated with the primary places of focus within Rentie Grove.

METHODOLOGY | DOCUMENTARY

Before branching out to other portions of the community, the places that I believed needing the most attention were those that possessed the most historical significance, and were also currently receiving regular activity (Figure 6.1). The JEE and JEI campus, which resides on the same land that was once home to the Rentie Grove schoolhouse, gas station, and one of the original churches, was represented by the stakeholders who originally invited me to be a part of their project. I asked both of these representatives from Jenks Public Schools, Site Principal Ryan Glaze and Executive Director of Construction and Community Services, Jeffrey Beyer, to share their progress on their area of focus. I wanted the audience to understand their stakeholder group's intent before learning additional information about other important places within Rentie Grove. The historical Rentie Grove Cemetery is also of great significance to the area since many descendants who are alive today intend for the historical cemetery to be their final resting place (Norton, 2020). I reached out to the current caretaker of the cemetery, Priscilla Norton, to gain insight on the importance of the space, and how it could best be honored and celebrated. Another key place that needed to be covered by a representative of the community was the Renie Grove Baptist Church. Shortly after reaching out to the current owners of the church to conduct an interview they accepted, but then quickly recanted in the same week. It is unclear why they chose not to participate; regardless, I pressed forward with the community leaders who did accept my invitations and who would help me shape the documentary. I contacted Eli Grayson, a citizen of the Muskogee Creek Nation and former president of the California Creek Association. Eli has a passion for preserving the Creek history in Oklahoma, therefore I felt his knowledge of the Creek and African-Creek settlers would shed light on the underlying story of Rentie Grove. Further, I contacted Hannibal B. Johnson, who is a local author, attorney, and professor, to further enlighten the audience on the topic of preserving communities. He organically spoke of the underlying story for all minority communities and of the best practices for honoring a community's ancestors.

METHODOLOGY | DOCUMENTARY

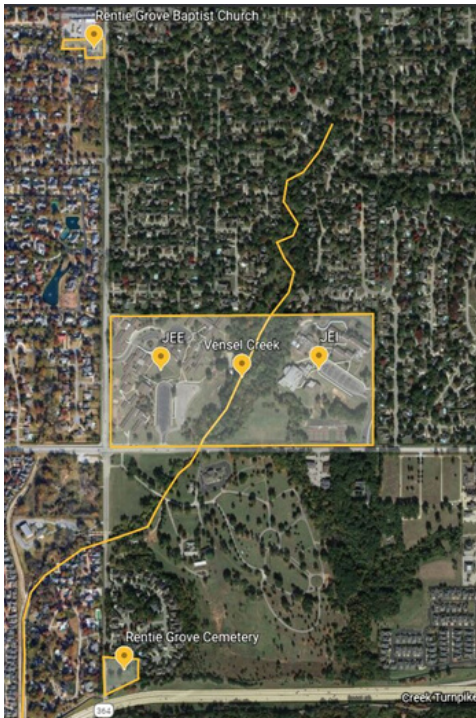


Figure 6.1 Google Maps Satellite Images, 2020
<https://www.google.com/maps/@36.034858,-95.9255099,15.5z>

Though there were several suitable community leaders of whom I could have contacted, time was of the essence and I decided to speak only to people with whom I had previously interacted. The majority of the people I reached out to were genuinely happy to participate in the documentary. I reasoned for the few who were apprehensive and declined participation. I imagined they were fearful the documentary may portray them in a negative light. Or, possibly those who declined were understandably concerned that other community viewers would interpret their interview incorrectly.

Regardless, I believe those who did participate contributed invaluable information, shaping the documentary into a concise and educational film that explained methods for starting a successful urban design project. Before each of the interviews, I sent the participants a copy of all the waivers they needed to review, sign, and return to me before filming commenced. I also sent them a list of the questions I would ask them during the interview. Though this portion of the communication process between me and the participants was not required by the IRB, I wanted to insure those who were donating their time to be involved in my documentary felt completely comfortable with the questions, and would not feel blindsided.

COMMUNITY EVENT



Captured January 2020

Due to a global and unprecedented coronavirus, COVID-19, I was unable to meet and finalize my remaining interviews. I had a scheduled meeting the second week of April 2020 with the Home Owners' Association of the neighborhood located north of the schools, Harvard Pointe. I am in the process of rescheduling this event for mid-summer 2020. However, as local and state governments continue enforcing city and state-wide restrictions at the time of this writing, it is not feasible to secure an exact date for an interview engagement. The best thing urban designers can do when uncontrollable issues arise is to stay positive and push forward. For example, now that I will be meeting with additional community leaders after completing my documentary, as opposed to several weeks before its completion, I will have the opportunity to share my film with the community at these events and hopefully leverage more involvement, foster a plan of action, and establish a sense of urgency to celebrate the Rentie Grove Community sooner rather than later.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Captured February 2020

I have a new found appreciation and respect for the role urban designers serve. I have learned the "middle-man" is not an easy position to occupy. To succeed in this role, communication is the ultimate key. Though I found communication to be the single element to resolution, it also became the most difficult to engineer and develop among the stakeholders within the original project. Throughout this experience, I often reflected on the early settlers of Rentie Grove, and their hope for a better life as they grew their community. Though I could never equate my own experiences of adversity for an urban design project to that of the freedmen, I appreciate and realized the profound difficulties they must have faced while settling a new community. Given the time period in American history, I often pondered the adversities that plagued the freedmen, and used my knowledge of their fortitude to motivate my endeavors throughout this process

RESULTS | KEY TAKEAWAYS

I continued to learn throughout this process that adaptation is essential when working in any group setting. Though the original Rentie Grove stakeholder group was kind enough to allow me to join their meetings, it was clear from the first meeting that I was to personally experience uncharted waters as an urban designer. I adapted to the stakeholders needs and wishes to the best of my ability. I avoided pushing the boundaries with the stakeholders, and tried to stay in my lane while still respecting the urban design profession through incorporating my knowledge from higher education and experience. Admittedly, if I did not have my own deadlines per the University of Oklahoma's requirements, I would have persevered with the group and not pivoted away in December 2019.

In this particular case, I was on a tight deadline with OU which was out of my control. I knew the pace with which the stakeholders were moving made it unlikely that I would be talking to any community members for over a year. Connecting with the community is a large part of urban design, so when I put myself in the position of my jurors and the university, I too knew I would be displeased with a student who had not yet engaged the community after nearly one year's time. Therefore, I had to make a tough, but necessary decision to pivot away from the stakeholders rather than continuing to adapt to their restrictive perimeters of their Rentie Grove project. I am thrilled that I found a way to communicate with community leaders and share their story, adapt to the unexpected environment that was my reality less than one year ago, and educate future designers who may be faced with similar challenges through sharing my story via film. I will respectfully remember the lessons taught and strengths gained by the original community that once was, and will forever in my heart remain, Rentie Grove.

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