What motivated you to incorporate service-learning into your teaching?

“Pedagogically I like the idea of putting students in a situation where they’re outside of their comfort zone or their zone of familiarity. The reason I like it is because creativity can become a very introverted process. It can too easily be broken down to basically designing for what I like. There are a lot of challenges that you can give to design students that they can relate to, that are in their realm of familiarity so you try and push them too be creative around things that are outside their immediate [comfort zone]; to challenge them and push them to the edge of their ability. They can easily lapse into that realm of familiarity. If you give them challenges that really are outside of what their life experiences have taught them I think it gives them a very different way of looking at creativity. It gets them thinking more about the role that information plays in creativity. It gets them thinking about what a creative idea really is.”

What do you think is the added value of service-learning?

“No matter what the population has been and no matter how potentially negative the implications could be, it always amazed me how engaging those challenges became. I think it’s just a combination of perceiving real needs as motivating and doing things that are an attempt to make a difference. It always challenges students to design for an ideal or try and move out of the box of conventional thinking and conventional design responses for the particular population that they’re working with.

Using building as an example, students quickly realize when they build something there is just an enormous amount of details you have to think about that if you were doing it on paper you could just gloss over. When you’re actually building stuff you have to make it work. You have to make it buildable and you have to be able to build it within a certain timeframe. The complexity compounds and so it can be quite time consuming. But I think that’s good learning. They’re learning about processes, learning about empathetic design for people who really need something.

As a pedagogical approach I think that the potential for motivating students internally—self-motivation—is really strong in that type of teaching. There are certain types of content and courses where it is kind of hard to find the point of motivation for students. But it’s easier with something that’s like, ‘Oh really, wow, this is intense. Why aren’t we paying more attention to this?’ That ‘charting new territory’ and ‘I’m making a difference.’ Not just charting new territory but making a difference in people’s lives.”