HEALTHY URBAN GARDEN OASIS: The Mantua Design Build project was a two term community outreach design build course that included 19 students from Drexel University's Westphal College of Media Arts and Design. The project offered students the opportunity to become engaged in a community design process in the Mantua neighborhood directly adjacent to the Drexel University Campus. Interdisciplinary teams consisting of students from architecture and interior design programs, gained skills in community building, user needs, occupancy, team design, and team construction. The project took place at Mantua Presbyterian Apartments which is a HUD section 202 senior housing facility with 65 single resident units, and no useable outdoor space. The Project Director wrote and won a grant of $20,000 through the Drexel office for Community Initiatives. The project included landscape refurbishment and a new exterior space with furniture and a garden. The course was split into two terms over a six month timeline. The first term consisted of programming, design, community interface, and element prototyping. The second part included construction, documentation, on-site construction and fabrication. The process included receiving advice from biomedical engineering students about the positive health benefits a garden can have, including both physical and psychological benefits. In addition several events were held for residents to take part in charettes to identify working solutions for the space. At the end of the course, the design build had successfully transformed the empty space to a relaxing gathering space where residents can interact with their neighbors and families. Currently, the project is being studied for post-occupancy information in collaboration with Drexel’s Department of Public Health as part of required coursework in Epidemiology.

HEALTH TRANSFORMATION. The project created a space for residents to come together and increase the amount of time they spend outside. Suggestions made by the residents called for a place that they could gather, play games, garden and relax. Considerations for accessibility such as safe paving and maintenance were also incorporated to ensure safety. Students incorporated other aspects of design such as circulation, spatial hierarchy, and interaction of the space with its surroundings. The paths were seen as a ‘loop’ that the residents could repeatedly stroll to enhance their outdoor time and movement. The final space included a garden, a place for formal gatherings, different seating options and tables for their various activities. The area successfully layered together different functions and activities into one cohesive space. The garden was made possible through the generous in kind donation of a local landscaping firm.

COLLABORATION. Throughout the entire process, students learned about working through collaboration as a team. Teams of architecture and interior design students worked together in order to develop design proposals for the space. The teams collaborated with biomedical engineering students, faculty, clients and consultants. Students worked with professionals such as a local landscape architect as well as with the residents to find out specifically what they wanted to see in the space. In addition, students learned about collaborating with the surrounding community. Students reached out to local organizations for donations of native plants and trees for the garden that they incorporated into the space.

PHASE TWO. Community projects are usually ongoing processes of engagement between groups, and this one is no different. This image represents explorations of shade structure possibilities on site. Prepared as initial speculative images by an undergraduate researcher, the images are meant to show possibilities for shading the seating areas. This has been identified by residents and the designers as the next need for the site. A sun study was conducted to see how shadows would fall throughout the day, and a pattern exercise was undertaken to see how additional pattern would look on the site. A more extensive design process would take place in the spring with a group of student volunteers to mount shade on the site in time for the coming summer. The pattern designs were inspired by patterns and shadows in nature.