Imbued with a shared commitment to remain in the city’s rebuilding efforts for the long haul, starting in 2005, DUSP faculty and students set out to work alongside the people of New Orleans to assist in the recovery of the city.
Acknowledgements

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After Katrina
MIT’s Department of Urban Studies + Planning Takes On Big Questions About Rebuilding

Saturday, August 28, 2005: Hurricane Katrina becomes a category 5 hurricane. There are warnings of possible storm surge flooding. That day, a mandatory evacuation is ordered for Orleans Parish. The storm strikes eastern Louisiana, including the Orleans, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany Parishes. A 20-foot storm surge flows from Lake Pontchartrain into nearby Orleans Parish. By August 30, three levees have been breached, including the 17th Street, New London, and Industrial Canals, flooding 80% of the city. All in all, 1,800 die in New Orleans and more than 217,000 homes are damaged or destroyed. The displaced include 30,000 senior residents and 17,000 low-income families, many lacking telephones and other means of communication and personal transportation.

In the eight years since Katrina, faculty, students, and alumni from MIT’s Department of Urban Studies + Planning (DUSP) and School of Architecture + Planning (SA+P) have worked in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast with many organizations and on many issues. DUSP’s and MIT’s work in New Orleans has been sustained and evolved through the entrepreneurship of faculty and students who built relationships in the city and dedicated teaching, studies, and community service work toward post-Katrina rebuilding efforts.

“MIT’s mission is grounded in service to society, and in the weeks and months ahead, we will be looking to our faculty for ideas and ways to bring our talents to bear on the enormous challenge of rebuilding these communities.”

- President Susan Hockfield, in a letter to the MIT community on September 15, 2005
MIT DUSP Takes Action

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, eighty percent of New Orleans was flooded. Devastation was widespread. Entire neighborhoods remained underwater for two weeks, some even longer. MIT DUSP students and faculty designed projects in collaboration with local officials, community organizers, and developers to be part of, and learn from, rebuilding the Gulf Coast.

“I remember Professor Vale telling me that the rebuilding process was going to be slow... and that MIT was going to be working here for at least 10 years... whether he knew it or not, I took that as a commitment.”

- Seth Knudsen, MIT student ('08)
How to rebuild?

With three-quarters of the population of New Orleans evacuated, the majority of the city’s infrastructure damaged, and the tourism economy literally underwater, how would the city begin an operational response? Reestablishing basic services—electricity, water, and waste collection—would not be enough. Thousands of buildings, including schools, hospitals, retail stores, and homes, were unsafe to occupy. Thousands more lay condemned. Bringing people back was critical to the immediate recovery and long-term outcomes, but this would take months, if not years. In the meantime, decisions had to be made. How was New Orleans to function as a city when Katrina had exiled most of its citizens?

The first attempts at recovery planning took place behind closed doors, outside the city, away from public view. The city council and the mayor’s office established separate recovery committees, each advised by professionals. By and large, residents of flooded neighborhoods were excluded from these discussions.

MIT DUSP faculty and students rose to the challenge of how to rebuild by addressing problems that existed prior to Katrina and now impeded many residents from returning. Community Engagement became a driving force for change. Resilient Design became a principle by which communities positioned themselves for more sustainable living in their fragile coastal environment.

Imbued with a shared commitment to remain in the city’s rebuilding efforts for the long haul, DUSP faculty and students set out to work alongside the people of New Orleans.
Flood waters crash over neighborhoods during Hurricane Katrina.
Photo credit: Don McCrosky
Community Engagement

Assessing the extent of the storm’s damage, and seeing an insurmountable task ahead, many recommended that New Orleans shrink its footprint. Politicians, pundits, city officials, and professional planners were among them. But residents largely rejected the notion and began to initiate their own neighborhood recovery plans. They faced many challenges: People were scattered across the country, organizations lacked resources, and public processes lacked transparency. Effective community engagement was needed.

MIT DUSP began receiving requests for assistance from community groups, foundations, and unions. Early funders emerged, most community based, like the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC). The UUSC provided funds for students, including Rachel Wilch (MCP ’07), Leigh Graham (PhD ‘10), and Jainey Bavishi (MCP ’07), to survey and report on local community capacity.

Community engagement strengthened as groups working in the city began to employ students. In 2006, Emmaia Gelman (MCP ’07) worked for the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund on media communications and diaspora outreach. Jessica Berman-Boatright (MCP ’07) organized practitioners to discuss rebuilding challenges. Through the Deepening Democracy Initiative and the Center for Sustainable Engagement, Lakshmi Sridaran (MCP ’09) and Anna Livia Brand (PhD ’12) worked to expand the ability of marginalized groups to engage in city discussions about the future.

Students also put community engagement into practice when developing plans for Broad Street and St. Claude Avenue, as part of DUSP’s “Revitalizing Urban Main Streets” class. Students led community meetings, conducted interviews, and vetted proposals with stakeholders. More ideas for New Orleans were proposed than were ultimately implemented, but all students engaged district stakeholders in creating viable solutions.
“Funders who support the work of community organizing are not simply supporting the responses to Hurricane Katrina. They also are facilitating direct conversations about race and class in this city for the first time.”

- Jainey Bavishi (MCP ’07) and Rachel Wilch (MCP ’07)
  Newsletter of the Neighborhood Funders Group, Winter 2006

“I’ve heard many complaints from neighborhood activist who feel that they are not really included in the planning process. They don’t have the resources to go to all the meetings and they don’t know who these different planners are accountable to.”

- MIT Associate Professor Phil Thompson
Resilient Design

Resilience, the ability to recover from catastrophe quickly and with minimal harm, and mitigation, the ability to prevent future losses, are central tenets of urban planning and design. This is especially true for cities built in ecologically fragile locations like wetlands.

In 2008, MIT Professor Eran Ben-Joseph and Anna Livia Brand (PhD ‘12) ran a course with the Mississippi State University (MSU) Gulf Coast Community Design Studio (GCCDS). They developed an environmentally responsive plan for East Biloxi, an historically undervalued wetland community twice devastated by natural disasters: first by Hurricane Camille in 1969 and again by Katrina in 2005. The resulting Bayou Auguste Restoration project was a model of resilient design. What began as a group of students canoeing down the bayou culminated in a constructed wetland nature park that has increased environmental stewardship and fostered lasting community partnerships. Stephen Crim (MCP ’08) joined GCCDS and collaborated with local partners to build the design. In 2012, the restoration of Bayou Auguste received an award from the Mississippi Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. After the project’s completion, former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief administrator Lisa Jackson chose East Biloxi as the site for a national media event, announcing, “This is exactly the type of community project EPA hopes to see all over the country.”

“How might a mosaic of land uses, wetlands, programmed open space, and elevated residential neighborhoods be deployed to create a coherent, ecologically-based strategy for hazard mitigation in Auguste Bayou, a tidal wetland that penetrates the peninsula of East Biloxi?”

- East Biloxi Studio Objective Spring 2008
“The Biloxi experience taught me that community engagement is about working with other organizations. We were mindful in always asking, “who can we work with, and who can be our partner?” In the bigger picture, the Bayou Auguste venture was only possible because we had built up trust over time through working with other institutions and organizations.”

- Stephen Crim, (MCP ’08)

Lift House

Prof. Reinhard Goethert and MIT’s Special Interest Group in Urban Settlement (SIGUS) also applied the principles of resilience and mitigation to produce a sustainable housing design for Houma, Louisiana, in 2006 and 2007. The LiftHouse project successfully enabled residents to return to new homes in their community. MIT’s Public Service Center (PSC) supported MIT students working at the Houma site. Zach Lamb (SMarch ’10) and Jeffrey Fugate (MCP ‘07) received PSC funding to write a manual outlining the steps an organization should take when embarking on a home-building program.

“In the US, only now does one see communities asserting themselves and using their collective strength to seek re-building assistance.”

- Prof. Reinhardt Goethert
Where to rebuild?

Identifying Where to Rebuild

After Katrina, Mayor Ray Nagin formed a commission to advise the City on rebuilding.

The “Bring New Orleans Back” Commission caused new waves with what came to be known as its “Green Dot Plan.” Their map of New Orleans designated areas for flood control, marking low-lying sections with large green dots. The infamous green dot became a symbol residents rallied against in the fight to rebuild their communities.
Once Katrina floodwaters were pumped out of New Orleans, federal and local government efforts first sought to rebuild the parts of the city that were the least damaged. Areas were prioritized based on where redevelopment was expected to have the greatest immediate impact. This strategy came as a shock to New Orleans residents, especially those in heavily damaged areas. Neighborhoods would be rated based on their ability to recover and their viability. Residents received no guarantees that basic services and infrastructure would ever be restored. MIT DUSP faculty and students followed a different strategy, partnering with self-motivated, neighborhood-based development organizations, some located in badly flooded areas. Projects focused on rapidly reviving the historically vibrant communities and active commercial corridors in New Orleans. Schools near habitable housing, iconic buildings, and essential community and retail services were flagged to receive attention and support.

Many sites in New Orleans, including the selected neighborhoods and streets cited below, display the intensive work of DUSP faculty and students engaged there after the storm:

**Broad Street**
* A street populated by small and local businesses, bordering cultural enclaves such as Mid-City, Faubourg St. John, Lafitte, and Tremé.

**Broadmoor**
* An energetic subdistrict of Uptown in a low-lying area, badly compromised by flooding in the aftermath of the storm.

**O.C. Haley Boulevard**
* An important commercial corridor with a storied past, located next to the Garden District and around the corner from the Superdome.

**Village de l’Est**
* A suburban neighborhood that succumbed to levee failures, now home to large, first-generation Vietnamese American and African American communities.
Broad Street

Broad Street is the main thoroughfare through four distinct neighborhoods in New Orleans. MIT Professors Karl Seidman and Susan Silberberg selected Broad Street as the site for their spring 2007 “Revitalizing Urban Main Streets” class. Students surveyed Broad Street and its surrounding neighborhoods, and then proposed the establishment of a nonprofit organization to lead the revitalization efforts.

Broad Community Connections (BCC) emerged as a new nonprofit organization dedicated to improving Broad Street. BCC hired Jeffrey Schwartz (MCP ’08), a lifelong New Orleans resident, as its executive director. Farzana Serang (MCP ‘12) and Marcie Parkhurst (MCP ‘12) completed several projects to advance BCC’s work. Other class projects resulted in a revolving loan fund for small business improvements and a partnership with a new community land trust.

In 2009, Jacquelyn Dadakis (MCP ‘10) and Aditi Mehta (MCP ‘10) won second prize in the J.P. Morgan Chase Community Development Competition for their “Broad Refresh” proposal. It laid the plans for a fresh-food hub consisting of a new grocery store, a processing center for a healthy school lunch distributor, a rooftop urban farm, and a community-supported agricultural program. In 2012, BCC acquired the project site, and a large food retailer announced its participation in January 2013.

“City officials or architects use research to validate assumptions based on their own perceptions. This exhibition intends to inspire members of Broad Street to bravely showcase their thoughts, ideas, and concerns to the public.”

- Aditi Mehta (MCP ’10)
When the levees failed, large sections of New Orleans experienced heavy flooding. Mayor Ray Nagin’s Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission presented an aggressive land-use and flood-control plan. The plan included a map that seemed to turn several existing neighborhoods, including Broadmoor, completely into parkland. It came to be known as the “Green Dot Plan.”

Community members from Broadmoor responded to this threat by organizing. Pre-Katrina, this neighborhood had housed nearly 8,000 residents, 70 percent of whom were African American. In 2006, residents formed the Broadmoor Development Corporation (BDC) to create their own plan for rebuilding their neighborhood. Students from MIT and Harvard University joined their cause.

“We were confronted with the green dot map, and there was a lot of anger and outrage. It spurred a collective will to prevent it from happening. It started with rallies and built into an effort to build a collective voice.”

- Interview with Karen Miller, Broadmoor Resident and BDC Office Manager

Over the next several years, MIT students worked with BDC on a series of on-site, targeted projects to “Bring Broadmoor Back.” Anna Livia Brand (PhD ‘12) focused on reopening the Rosa Keller Library. Jeffrey Schwartz (MCP ‘08) formulated proposals for the redevelopment of the Bohn Ford Building, an historic car dealership in the neighborhood. Hattie Silberberg (MCP ‘08) analyzed opportunities for the commercial financing of neighborhood projects.

In 2009, MIT’s Public Service Center sponsored the New Orleans LA(NOLA) Fellows Program, formalizing DUSP’s partnership with BDC. Student projects continue to support capacity building for BDC, while MIT Professor Karl Seidman serves on the board.
O.C. Haley Boulevard

O.C. Haley Boulevard is an inspiring example of renewal. From its founding at the turn of the 20th century until the 1960s, the area was one of the city’s only racially integrated shopping districts. The street also boasted the first library open to African Americans in New Orleans. Originally known as Dryades Street, it was both a major corridor and an important site for the Civil Rights movement. In the 1980s, the street was renamed for the activist Oretha Castle Haley.

Starting in the late 1960s, the once-thriving thoroughfare began to struggle with changing commercial patterns. Since the late 1990s, and especially after Hurricane Katrina, reinvestment efforts have given the O.C. Haley area new life. It is now a thriving cultural district with two art centers, a charter school, social services, faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and a YMCA. MIT DUSP students and faculty have significantly buoyed this revitalization. DUSP alumni at the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA) steered the construction of a new headquarters there, creating a wave of redevelopment.

Another force for reinvestment has been the Good Work Network, a nonprofit organization supporting small businesses. DUSP students designed a plan for redevelopment of the Franz Building for the Chase Community Development Competition in 2008. Their submission secured a $25,000 prize. With that financial leverage, Good Work Network was able to renovate the Franz Building.
Home to a large Vietnamese American population, Village de L’Est was known for its vibrant community long before the levees broke. Katrina did not succeed in submerging the community’s voice. Residents united under Father Vien The Nguyen of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church (MQVNC) and formed a Community Development Corporation (CDC). Its mission: to help local businesses return and grow.

Since 2006, DUSP students have supported MQVNC-CDC with small business development, commercial district marketing, and urban farming efforts. One project, a microenterprise development plan called Access to Equity, was the focus of Uyen Le (MCP ‘09). She advocated for linguistic and culturally competent practices by public and private service providers after Hurricane Katrina, successfully raising $100,000 in block grants and direct solicitations.

Katrina badly damaged the main health care facility in New Orleans East. A student team wrote an award-winning plan for the BRIDGE Health Center, which expanded services for Village de L’Est residents. Another team worked to establish a permanent clinic in the local community health center.

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“MQVNC-CDC has tackled the most challenging recovery issues in New Orleans: environmental justice, education and health care reform, repopulation and political empowerment. MIT DUSP has been an ongoing partner in its ground-breaking work.”

- Karl Seidman, DUSP Professor
What to rebuild?

Months passed. The receding waters slowly revealed the scale of destruction that Hurricane Katrina left in her wake. Debris and waste were painstakingly cleared: grocery stores still stocked with rows of spoiled food, entire buildings turned to rot and mildew, city streets twisted into broken concrete, automobiles still partly submerged. The biggest trials remained ahead. What to rebuild first? What took precedence? The mission to restore New Orleans hinged on who would return. When they did, whose voices would be heard above the clamor? Which claims would prevail with insurers and in land-ownership disputes? Which public housing would reopen? Which would not?

Within city hall, the response to the question “What to rebuild?” was “Start big.” Large projects, dependent upon funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, made their way to the top of the docket. Few of the remaining local constituents had the resources and wherewithal to advocate for their own districts’ needs. Smaller, seemingly less critical projects were pushed farther and farther down the list: an elementary school in the mostly abandoned residential block, the once-active transit line, now defunct. But DUSP recognized their vital importance in the city’s return to full functioning.

Reviving schools, public transportation, and small businesses was key to post-Katrina recovery. MIT DUSP faculty and students focused their research initiatives on that revival. Over time, the city began to hum again.
Small business owners faced the dual hardship of rebuilding their homes and reviving their businesses after Hurricane Katrina. MIT DUSP has partnered with three small business groups in New Orleans since 2006. The Good Work Network (GWN) and the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation (MQVNC-CDC) assist small businesses in underserved communities with leveraging growth opportunities. Broad Community Connections (BCC), a community development corporation, supports small businesses along the Broad Street commercial corridor. BCC was conceived as part of an MIT DUSP course.

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“Local banks don’t help local businesses. They don’t do startups. You have to find someone who has money to stand behind you.”


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DUSP students developed a winning submission to the Chase Community Development Competition that helped the GWN to build new office space and a business incubator. GWN used a portion of the funds to purchase two adjacent vacant lots. In 2011, students evaluated the creation of a food truck hub and the following year developed an implementation plan and small business strategy for food trucks at that site.

Before BCC, no advocacy group represented merchants along the corridor. Aditi Mehta (MCP ‘10) created “Who’s on Broad?” to give a voice to those merchants. Stephen Kennedy’s (MCP ‘12) Good Guide to Great Signs toolkit supported BCC’s Iconic Signage project to enhance the visibility of small businesses through distinctive neon signs crafted by local artists. Another student project proposed a revolving loan fund for small business owners who otherwise faced barriers to accessing investment capital.
Schools

Schools are vital organizations in recovery efforts. In fact, successful schools and well-functioning neighborhoods are inextricably linked. After a disaster like Katrina, schools reanimate devastated neighborhoods by drawing families back to their homes for their children’s education. At the time Katrina hit, more than 90,000 students—nearly 20 percent of the city’s population—attended 200 public and private schools in New Orleans. After the storm, most schools were flooded and half were destroyed. Rehabilitation of the poorest-performing schools slowed the recovery for the entire education system. The teachers’ union collapsed, which left teachers fighting for their jobs.

MIT DUSP student research advanced advocacy for the redevelopment of schools. Seth Knudsen (MCP ‘08) wrote his master’s thesis on how the reopening of New Orleans’ schools would affect neighborhood redevelopment. He concluded that despite substantial flooding, “residential redevelopment was concentrated in the immediate vicinity of schools that had reopened. Residential redevelopment was slower to take hold if neighborhood schools remain closed.”

Student research also advanced advocacy around school equity. MIT Professor Cherie Abbanat’s undergraduate “City to City” class studied school reclamation efforts. Lakshmi Sridaran (MCP ‘09) and Najah Shakir (SB ‘12) analyzed the impact of school rebuilding on low-income and minority families. In 2011, Megan Bowman (SB ‘13) and William Chin (SB ‘12) evaluated blighted, city-owned lots that could be developed to benefit schools.
Public Transportation

New Orleans is an intermodal transportation hub for maritime vessels, streetcars, and automobiles. It also boasts the longest continually running trolley line in the country. Like other American cities, New Orleans has suffered from disinvestment in public transit in favor of private modes of transportation. And, like other cities, the preference for the automobile has encouraged suburban sprawl. One-quarter of the population of New Orleans does not own a personal vehicle. On the eve of Katrina, the disparity in access to transportation meant that households with cars evacuated the city, while those without stayed behind.

After the storm, six MIT DUSP alumni founded Transport for NOLA (renamed “Ride New Orleans”), a nonprofit think-and-do-tank committed to enhancing access to multiple modes of transit in the city and the equity it provides. In 2010, the group worked with the New Orleans Transit Authority (RTA) to secure a $45 million grant for streetcar expansion. Ride New Orleans worked with the RTA to give software designers the opportunity to develop cell-phone applications for digital display of the transit schedule.

DUSP undergraduate students collaborated with Ride New Orleans to improve information on transit needs and usage. Janet Li (SB ‘11) proposed a community benefits agreement for the neighborhoods around the St. Claude neighborhood.

“Urban recovery is about reconstructing the myriad social relations embedded in schools, workplaces, childcare arrangements, shops, places of worship, and places of play and recreation.”

Signs of continuing recovery and rebuilding abound in New Orleans—neighborhoods are reviving, rebuilding, and growing stronger; neighborhood institutions are returning to business; and the festivals, food, music, and culture that make the Crescent City so unique are once again thriving. In so many critical ways, the process of rebuilding is ongoing.

MIT’s Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP) is privileged to continue playing an active role in New Orleans’ rebuilding efforts. Over the past eight years, more than 250 MIT students, faculty, and alumni have engaged in revitalization activities in the Gulf Coast region.

Post-Katrina, DUSP’s active involvement includes planning and implementation efforts in New Orleans across multiple neighborhoods, organizations, and issues—all with tangible impacts on the city. The sustained nature, breadth, and results of this engagement derive from the initiative of faculty and students, with important institutional supports from the University and the Department. All in all, this work emanates from a dedication to engagement with local partners.

Going forward, MIT DUSP will remain committed to sustaining New Orleans’ entrepreneurship and community values. We are honored to be part of the revitalization of this great city.

“While lynchpin projects are important, what is equally important is community and organization development. The little threads you help to create are part of the bigger successes—they just take longer to establish and are not as flashy or easy to see. Just as important as the project successes is the fact that we are with communities on the ground.”

- MIT DUSP graduate Anna Livia Brand (PhD ’12), now an assistant professor in the University of New Orleans School of Planning and Urban Studies, reflects on her experience.
MIT Project Participants

Cherie Abbanat Professor 2010
Carine Abi Akar SB 2012
Viktorija Abolina MArch 2009
William Abrahamson MArch 2008
Oreoluwa Alao MCP 2008
Rachel Alonso MCP 2012
Elena Alschuler MCP 2012
Andrew Amey MCP 2010
Rana Amir-tahmasebi MCP 2008
Gabriel Arboleda MArch 2004
Non Arkaraprasertkul MArch 2007
John Arroyo MCP 2010
Juhee Bae SB 2014
Bernadette Baird-Zars MCP 2010
Pollina Bakhteiarov SB/MCP 2011
Lawrence Barriner SB/MCP 2014
Jainey Bavishi MCP 2007
Eran Ben-Joseph Professor 2008
Brandon Brooks Berger SM 2007
Jessica/Jessie Berman Boatright MCP 2007
Gerald W. Billes MArch 1972
Sarah Bindman SB 2013
Vanessa Bowens SB 2013
Megan Bowman SB 2012
Sam Bowring Professor 2008
Leila Bozorg MCP 2010
Amber Bradley MCP 2007
Benjamin Bradlow MCP 2013
William Bradshaw PHD 2010
Elaine Braithwaite MCP 2012
Anna Brand PHD 2011
Benjamin Brandin MCP 2010
Karim Brandt MCP 2010
Xavier de Souza Briggs Professor 2008
Emma Broderick SB 2014
Alice Brooks SB 2010
Rachel Buchhorn SB 2011
Robert “Tim” Campos MArch 2007
JoAnn Carmin Professor 2008
Blanca Carrillo SB 2013
Tara Carter-Hernandez SM 1992
Justice Mya Castaneda MCP 2013
Chrystal Chern SB 2016
Jonathan Cherry MCP 2008
Liz Chimienti MCP 2010
William Chin SB 2011
Carolyn Choy MCP 2007
Gayle Christiansen MCP 2010
Tiffany Chu SB 2010
Eugene “Gene” Cizek MCP 1966
Phillip Clay Professor 2008
Carey Clouse SMarchS 2007
Andy Cook MCP 2015
Stephen Crim MCP 2008
Fernando Cruz-Villalba MCP 1981
Raimundo Cruzat SM 2013
Dayna Cunningham Director CoLab 2004
Christine Curella MCP 2013
Tai DaCosta SB 2008
Jacquelyn Dadakis MCP 2010
Mai Dang MCP 2011
Dorian Dargan SB 2011
Omari Davis MCP 2009
Margo Dawes SB 2014
Sloan Dawson MCP 2010
Lawrence Joseph Delaune SM 1952
Laura Delgado MCP 2010
John Demonchaux Professor 2008
Matthew De Jong MArch 2009
Marissa-Grace Desmond MArch 2010
Mark DeWitt MCP 1983
Giuliana Di Mambro MCP/Sloan 2013
Ben Dookchitra MCP 2007
Jocelyn Drummond MCP 2013
Ari Epstein PhD 1995
Shawn Escoffery MCP 1998
Kathleen Evans MCP 2012
Kevin Feeney MCP 2011
John Fernandez Professor 2008
Lori Ferriss SB/MENG 2010
Virginia Flores MCP 2009
Victor Franckiewicz MCP 1976
Sheila Frankel Professor 2008
Jeffrey Fugate MCP 2007
Ying Gao MCP 2014
Jess Garz MCP 2013
Christine Gaspar MArch/MCP 2004
Tamika Gauvin MCP 2010
Emmaia Gelman MCP 2007
William “Bill” Gilchrist MArch 1982
Reinhard Goethert Professor 2008
Thomas Goff SB 2010
Paula Gonzales SB 2014
Cali Kay Gorewitz MCP 2008
Leigh Graham PhD 2010
Rance Graham-Bailey MCP 2013
Annemarie Gray MCP 2014
Chris Guiogon MArch 2010
Vasudha Gupta SB/MCP 2012
Melissa Haefner SB 2010
Kristen Hall MCP 2008
Terianne C. Hall PhD 2008
Sarah Hammitt MCP 2010
Jeffrey Hebert MCP 2004
Alberto Herrera SB 1992
Melissa Higbee MCP 2013
Jianxiang Huang MCP 2007
Gerald Hunter MCP 2010
Nick Iuviene MCP 2010
Dalia Al Hussein MArch 2007
Naveen Jawaid MCP 2010
Wang Jue MCP 2010
Ian Kaminski-Coughlin MArch 2010
Tushar Kansal MCP 2012
Jesse Kanson-Benaan MCP 2010
Michael Kaplan MCP 2013
Stephen Kennedy MCP 2012
Seth C. Knudsen MCP 2008
Marika Kobel MArch 2010
Tejus Kothari SB/MCP 2007
Lindsay Kramer Reul MCP 2012
Ethan Lacy MArch 2007
Zachary Lamb SMArchS 2010
Paul Lambert MCP 1991
Andreas Langousis MSCEE 2005
Allison Lassiter MCP 2009
Tran Le MCP 2008
Uyen Le MCP 2009
Marianna Leavy-Sperounis MCP 2010
Jae Rhim Lee Visiting Professor 2008
Victoria Lee MArch 2010
Christa Lee-Chuvala PhD 2010
Jonathan Leit MCP 2006
Nathan Lempers MCP 2009
Sharlene Leurig MCP 2007
Janet Li SB 2013
Wesley Look SM 2013
Chris Lyddy MCP 2007
Laura Machala MCP 2007
Eric Macres MCP 2010
James Madden MCP 2010
Ryan Maliszewski MCP/MArch 2012
Laura Manville MCP 2011
Sunaree Marshall MCP 2010
Amanda Martin MCP 2011
Sophie Martin MCP 2008
Cesar McDowell Professor 2008
Brendan McEwan MCP 2012
Colleen McHugh MCP 2013
Aditi Mehta MCP 2010
Rene Miller SB 2015
Steve Moga PhD 2010
Molly Mowery MCP 2008
Anna Muessig MCP 2013
Kiara Nagel MCP 2006
Tsukihito Nakajima MCP 2007
Earthea Nance MLK Fellow 2006
Heidi Nepf Professor 2007
Aditya Nochur MCP 2013
Meelena Oleksuik MArch 2008
Sandra Padilla MCP 2010
Marcie Parkhurst MCP 2012
Edgar Pedroza SMArchS 2008
Adele Phillips MArch 2009
Brett Piercy SM 2010
Drew Pierson MCP 2013
Martin Polz Professor 2008
Pablo Posada MCP 2014
Shiva Prakash MCP 2010
Jared Press MCP 2013
David Quinn MArch 2008
Amelia Ravin Pellegrin MCP 2004
Daniel Rinzler MCP 2013
Alice Rosenberg MArch 2010
Breanna Rossman MArch 2012
Laura Rothrock MCP 2008
Ilana Rotmensh SB 2009
Laura Royden SB 2013
Nicole Salazar MCP 2013
Pholkrit Sangthong MArch 2008
Gregory Sanial BS/Sloan 2007
Larry Sass Professor 2007
Ommeed Sathe MCP 2006
Eric Scanlon MCP 2011
Todd Schenk MCP 2009
Jeffrey Schwartz MCP 2008
Ted Schwartzberg MCP/MSRED 2008
Anne Schwieger MCP 2008
Karl Seidman Professor 2007
Farzana Serang MCP 2012
Najah Shakir SB 2012
Sagree Sharma MCP 2007
Alice Shay MCP 2012
Alison Sheppard SB/MCP 2013
Rosie Sherman MCP 2012
Hattie Sherman MCP 2008
Susan Silberberg MCP 2008
Adam Smith SB 2013
Holly Jo Sparks MCP 2010
Lakshmi Sridaran MCP 2009
Divya Srinivasan SB 2013
Julie Stein MCP 2010
Jonah Stern MCP 2012
Paul Stewart MS 2006
Matthew Steyer MCP 2012
Amy Stitely MCP 2008
Ben Stone MCP 2008
Amanda Stout MCP 2008
Alexandra “Sandi” Stroud SM 2002
Richard Suarez MCP 2012
Holly Sweet Professor 2008
Dulari Tahbildar MCP 2007
Rachael Tanner MCP 2013

Timothy Terway MCP 2007
J. Phillip Thompson Professor 2007
Maggie Tishman MCP 2014
Joel Turkel MArch 2009
Cristina Ungureanu MCP 2010
Larry Vale Professor 2006
Brian Valle MCP 2011
Jan Wampler Professor 2008
Angela Wang SB 2013
Evelyn Wang SB 2012
Jue Wang MCP 2010
Phillip Wang MSRED 2009
Yan Ping Wang MArch 2011
Kristen Watkins SB 2011
Angelica Weiner SB/MCP 2010
Erica Weiss MArch 2010
Annis Whitlow Sengupta MCP/PHD 2012
Rachel Meredith Wilch MCP 2007
Jerome R Williams MCP 2013
Suzana Williams SM/MCP 2010
Kohichi Yamagishi MCP 2008
Patricio Zambrano-Barragan MCP 2012
Kristin Ann Zeiber MArch 2013
Sara Zewde MCP 2010
Jiyang Zhang MCP 2010
Kathleen Ziegenfuss MCP 2009