For Mike Opuszynski ’06 of the School of Engineering, Lisa Roden ’04 of the Hartford Art School, and Lisa Cenotti ’04 of the Ward School of Technology, the summer of 2003 was memorable—but not in the way you might think. They didn’t travel the world or meet the loves of their lives. In fact, they spent their summer on the streets of Bloomfield, Conn.

So, what are their summer memories made of? On some days, they counted light poles. On others, they took an inordinate interest in the complexities of vacant lots in the town center. And on one truly unforgettable Friday, from six in the morning until eight at night, they sat on three separate street corners and counted the people who passed by, taking note of the direction from which they came. What motivated three college students to spend their summer in such a strange way?

It all started back in January 2003. Tom Hooper, Bloomfield town planner, approached John Carson ’65, the university’s senior advisor for corporate and community relations, asking if faculty and students could do a study for the town. This request spurred Carson to bring together David Pines, assistant professor and chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering; Jim Fuller ’98, associate professor of architecture; and Nancy Wynn ’98, associate professor of visual communication design. The three professors had worked on community projects individually, but Carson thought an interdisciplinary approach would result in an even stronger effort. The university’s Center for Integrated Design (CID) was born.

CID is a boon for local communities seeking new answers to their planning and design challenges. The center also fits President Walter Harrison’s vision of the university’s taking an active role in the community. Another plus is the strong service-learning component offered to students from various departments.

“We want students to do things that enhance their course work with a hands-on approach. Work with CID builds an appreciation for giving something back to the community, so hopefully, they will continue that focus later in their professional careers.”

As Fuller notes, “CID acts as a catalyst, bringing students’ energy and raw creativity to a project. The result is students’ getting invaluable experience and the community’s getting important data and thinking.” The multidisciplinary approach is also important, he adds. “Exposing architecture students to the concerns and ways of working of other disciplines is critical to their professional development.”

Nancy Wynn agrees. “The design profession involves a lot of collaboration—between designers and writers, vendors, and others. Besides being a good designer, you have to be a good communicator and be able to work with people.” She adds, “CID helps students learn those valuable interpersonal skills. The fact that CID work is a real job is also instructive. There is a sense of commitment and responsibility not only to me and the class but also to the client.”

CID can play an important and well-defined role in a new project, one that assists but does not compete with professional design firms. CID’s contributions and well-thought-out plans will enable Bloomfield to compete more successfully for grants. Specifically, CID supplied the town with in-depth recommendations on traffic, landscaping, pedestrian access, architecture, and signage. These steps in the process become much more expensive for the client when performed by the design firm.

Another member of the CID faculty team, Terri-Ann Hahn, adjunct professor of architecture, is a principal in the land planning firm, LADA, PC, in Simsbury, Conn. She brings the insights of a professional design firm to the CID mix. Hahn says she, along with the other faculty, “make sure that the final product is usable in the professional forum, that there are no gaps, and that the
product that CID produces works seamlessly with what a professional design firm needs in order to do its work.”

The Bloomfield project had three phases. During the summer of 2003, the three interns collected data. In the second phase, all three disciplines worked on projects utilizing the summer’s data in their fall and spring semester classes. Students met with the town engineer and town planner and took part in a focus group with other town officials and residents. Architecture students even made sketches based on people’s suggestions. The third phase put it all together. A written report by the faculty, completed in June 2004, put forth CID’s final recommendations, which covered everything from lighting and sidewalk conditions to recommending where the real center of town should be located. In mid-September, the final report was presented to the Bloomfield Town Council, which will evaluate it and report back on an implementation plan sometime later this fall.

Among the center’s future goals are to create a foundation to cover expenditures, a physical center, and a director to oversee CID’s efforts. A director could seek new community project opportunities and develop courses that actually bring students together from different disciplines.

“CID is small right now, so we only want to take on one project at a time,” says Pines. “We’ve finished with Bloomfield and are looking for something new. Some possibilities include projects coming from the Hartford Design Center, Upper Albany Avenue Neighborhood Center Design, Blue Hills Neighborhood Mix Use Study, and the Town of Essex, Conn.”

About the summer of 2003 in Bloomfield, Mike Opuszynski says, “I had friends from the art school and architecture program before I met the two Lisas, and we all would come up with competing stories about how one major was better than the other. But working with Lisa and Lisa was not like that at all. There was a mutual appreciation for each other’s abilities and the different qualities each person brought to the group. Working with them was definitely one of the most enlightening experiences I have had with students outside of the School of Engineering.

“And,” he adds with a grin, “if you ever want to know anything at all about pedestrian traffic patterns in Bloomfield, Conn., give us a call.”

The Center for Integrated Design faculty-student team reviews maps during the study of Bloomfield Center. Shown, left to right, are: Terri-Ann Hahn, adjunct professor of architecture; Nancy Wynn ’98, associate professor of visual communication design; David Pines, assistant professor and chair of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering; Lisa Roden ’04 of the Hartford Art School; and Mike Opuszynski ’06 of the Ward School of Technology.