April 2018

Graduate Scholars: Real-time Design

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Graduate students in the College of Architecture, Planning & Design’s fifth-year Design + Make Studio at Kansas State University are doing more than just creating their first piece of architecture; they are essentially working at their first job.

Real clients, real research and real building materials await these students, who work on real projects — many of which have received attention regionally and nationally.
The studio, now in its seventh year, is an academic collaboration between Kansas State University and el dorado, an architecture, urban design, curatorial and fabrication practice in Kansas City, Missouri. Led by David Dowell, studio consultant and principal architect for el dorado, the studio engages with clients to design and build a functioning piece of architecture from inception of design to the full completion of a project in one academic year. The projects often address public issues and challenges, such as affordable housing, environmental sustainability and more.

“The message of the studio is that these students are creating a world-class piece of architecture right now; it’s not something that happens next year or two years from now, or when they are a licensed architect,” Dowell said. “The students are having an impact on public issues and things of relevance to all of us right now, and they’re creating works of architecture that are significant right now.”

The students work as a cohesive group while collaborating with other designers and facing inescapable constraints such as budgets and schedules.

Angel Llanes, Denver, Colorado, and Nicole Bauknight, Minneapolis, Minnesota, both fifth-year architecture students, are members of the 2017-2018 studio. For their project, the studio is partnering with The Volland Store, a refurbished bed-and-breakfast and art gallery in Volland, Kansas. They are renovating an existing 24-by-24-foot kit house from the 1930s to help create an artist residency program and additional accommodation space.

The students’ extensive research on the history of the area made them realize that not much art is available to small towns in Kansas.

“We are working on ways to further the artist experience and the relationship to the community, so we’re engaged with organizing an artist residency program in Volland for the community and for artists,” Llanes said. “The intent is that this place becomes an artist community or a place for artists to come for their residency programs, serving multiple people at a time.”

By engaging with a real client — with supervision from Dowell — the students also gain additional skills that will be important after leaving the classroom.

“It is that relationship that you can develop with a client that gives you a chance to work on your skills and communication skills, because you’re explaining something architectural for someone who doesn’t necessarily understand that language, and communicating that effectively is really important,” Bauknight said.

The studio’s 2016-2017 class project, the Waldo Duplex in the heart of the Waldo neighborhood in Kansas City, Missouri, is the largest and most comprehensive project from the studio, according to Dowell. The 1,500 square-foot duplex was built to give individuals earning no more than 80 percent of average median income an opportunity to afford living in a vibrant neighborhood.

The Waldo Duplex received the 2017 AIA Central States Excellence in Architecture Honor Award; 2017 AIA Kansas City Honor Award — Small Architecture; 2017 Residential Architect Design Awards — Affordable Housing; a Project Honoree: 2017 Interior Design, Best of Year Award — Budget; 2017 Architect's Newspaper Best of Design Awards — Student Work, honorable mention; and was featured on several major websites and in publications.

Through these opportunities, the studio is developing a highly skilled and educated citizenry to advance the well-being of Kansas, the nation and beyond.

“As a land-grant university, it’s service learning we need to be able to articulate and the public benefit of these projects every year, and I’m happy to say we can do that,” Dowell said.

View previous projects and a blog from the Design + Make Studio at ksudesignmake.com/.