

Detroit Studio Helps Children Envision Changes in Their Neighborhoods

This summer the Detroit Studio Community Outreach project turned some Detroit children loose in their own neighborhoods with digital camcorders. With the help of Lawrence Tech architecture students, the children used the resulting videotape to envision ways to improve the place where they live.



Lawrence Tech architecture student Christina Span worked on the "Kids' Cams" summer project with teacher Melanie Matthews and students Chris Hunter and Jalen Henry at Burton International School in Detroit.

"Kids' Cams:

Children Designing Their Neighborhood Through Their Own Lenses" was the name of this offbeat approach to urban planning. The resulting video documents could be a catalyst for change.

The project was directed by Joongsu Kim, associate professor of architecture and director of the Detroit Studio, which is part of the College of Architecture and Design. The American Architectural Foundation of Washington, D.C., was the sponsor.

The Detroit Studio worked with Burton International School, American Indian Health Family Services of Southeast Michigan, and McNair Middle School. Greening of Detroit and Christ Community Development Corp. also participated in the project.

Lawrence Tech architecture students Michael Del Buono, Briar Selazak, Christina Span, and Matt Wilbur each worked with a team of seventh-graders at local schools in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of Detroit. The students helped these children document their neighborhoods with digital camcorders, develop their ideas about their environment into design proposals, and construct models for projects to improve their neighborhood.

The Kids' Cams project featured a weekly program, conducted over eight consecutive weeks. For the first three weeks, three groups with three teens spent several hours per week using a digital camcorder to document what they liked and didn't like about their neighborhoods. Each team reviewed and edited their video.

Then the children developed ideas into design proposals and constructed models for projects to improve their neighbor-

hood. The whole process was videotaped. The final videos were presented to a large body of students, teachers, school principals, and parents at Lawrence Tech. These videos also will be presented to the general public at key community sites in the neighborhood in the future.

The outcomes of this project can be easily disseminated via the video medium. The Detroit Studio will develop a project manual so that any school in Detroit can participate. A digital camcorder will be available to any local K-12 school to undertake a similar video project.

"This project aims to strengthen long-term relationships between our studio and the communities we serve," Kim said. "The Kids' Cams is a small-scale pilot program and can be expanded to fill a longer time frame."

According to Kim, participants agreed that the children's videos helped increase their awareness, appreciation, and understanding of architecture, the physical environment, and neighborhood revitalization.

The Detroit Studio Community Outreach Program, which began in 1999, resides in a satellite studio on West Grand Blvd. in Detroit's New Center area. The program assists underserved communities in Detroit and other cities with their neighborhood revitalization projects.

Students and faculty at the studio collaborate with residents, local K-12 schools, community development agencies, governmental officials, professionals, and other stakeholders through community workshops, focus groups, social research, and public presentations and exhibitions. The studio's activities have been published and have won awards both locally and nationally.