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.

“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 Joongsun 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 neighborhood. 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.

This year the LTU Diversity Seminar Series is partnering with the Holocaust Memorial Center’s International Institute of the Righteous to promote the concept of altruism and socially responsible behavior.

The International Institute of the Righteous is devoted to the study of altruism in the face of social and ideological repression. All of this year’s diversity seminars will have a social responsibility and service component.

“Not only do we want to promote respect for other cultures,” said Melinda Weinstein, assistant professor of humanities and the seminar series coordinator, “we want our students to see others as themselves. This is where altruism begins.”

The Institute wants Lawrence Tech students to become “ambassadors of righteousness” by sharing what they have learned about social responsibility and altruism with other students and with the larger community. “It is our hope that by introducing our students to the idea of selflessness though vivid examples, students will be inspired to help others,” Weinstein added.

Weinstein is planning a “special topics” upper-division elective, “Altruism in History, Literature and Art,” that will enable “ambassadors,” identified in their freshman year, to pursue critically and experientially the value of service to others at a higher level.

All members of the campus community are invited to attend the series this year. For more information or to volunteer as an “ambassador,” contact Weinstein at weinstein@ltu.edu.

Coming up in the Diversity Seminar Series:

- Musicians Matt Watroba and Robert Jones will demonstrate multi-ethnic influences in American music. Tuesday, Oct. 17, 12:30-1:45 p.m. in S100.

- Renowned Indian dance company Nadanta will perform “Ahimsa” (Nonviolence) with original choreography based on the lives of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. Friday, Nov. 17, 7:30-9:30 p.m. in S100.

- Tom Luster of the Department of Child and Family Ecology at Michigan State University will discuss “The Lost Boys of Sudan,” a project he founded to resettle boys that had lost their families. Sisimayo Faki Henry, one of the “lost boys,” will speak about his experiences in Sudan and America. Monday, Dec. 4, 7:30-9 p.m. in S100.

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