

Freeing minds: Architecture camp helps shape future professionals

By Tom Bailey Jr.

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After just two weeks of Discovering Architecture Summer Camp, the high-schoolers spoke the language.

The 18 students didn't refer, for example, to a "roof" or "wall" as they presented their design projects last weekend to a roomful of parents and professors at the University of Memphis Department of Architecture.

Instead, they spoke of the "horizontal planes" and "vertical planes" for the theoretical pavilion each designed for the U of M campus.

The point was not to make the students sound pretentious, but to free their minds from the constraints of what a roof or wall is supposed to be and look like. To help them think, said Jenna Thompson, an adjunct professor who helped lead the camp, "outside the box."

Like all the other campers, ninth-grader Ariel Alexander took a turn standing before the crowded room, holding the cardboard model of her design and explaining why she shaped it the way she did.

"I designed this for gatherings or to be by yourself," explained Alexander, of Madison Consolidated High in Madison, Ind. "I wanted some element of privacy, so I gave it a long vertical plane. It's open and it's got privacy."

A judging panel -- Michael Hagge, chairman of the U of M Department of Architecture, Michael Chisamore, assistant professor and director of the Center for Sustainable Design, adjunct professor Jimmie Tucker of Self Tucker Architects, and Thompson of LRK Architects and a sustainability design consultant -- critiqued each project. They gave big portions of enthusiastic support and small doses of constructive criticism, gently applied.

"I really like this project," Tucker told Ariel.

"I like that you've got the opportunity to experience it one way here," Tucker said, pointing to one end of a long horizontal plane, or wall. "And you extended the plane out to sit in an outdoor room."

Then Tucker said something that had Ariel beaming as she returned to her seat. Her design, he said, "has a lot of rich, rich features to it."

Rich experiences came in bunches at the camp, five hours a day over the two weeks.

Each student was asked to give his or her project a one-word name capturing the essence of the design.

KeTyria Moore called hers "Clarity."

"I just wanted to do something different and fun," said KeTyria, an 11th-grader at Hollis F. Price Middle College High.

Chisamore, in his critique, told KeTyria, "You call this 'Clarity,' but when I look at it there's actually a lot of complexity." He liked how she used wall openings to frame views, and how a column supported several roofs and also defined different spaces inside.

Chisamore also loved that another wall opening held a see-saw seat that served both sides of the wall. "It bridges the spaces and is very interesting," he said.

Students were exposed to the college environment in the Architecture Department's Jones Hall, and interacted closely with professors. They got a taste of architectural basics, using computer applications, building models, drawing freehand, planning spaces, using Photoshop and learning from case studies.

They toured highly designed modern buildings and heard of the importance of historic preservation.

The U of M Department of Architecture and AIA (American Institute of Architects) Memphis have jointly organized the camp for nine summers now.

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