

Designing the Campus of the Future

Design students wowed industry experts with inspired creativity as they competed in Steelcase's 7th annual NEXT Student Design Competition.

Tech-savvy, connected and aware of the global economy, students, families and academia's top talent are placing increasingly high demands on education at all levels. Forward thinking institutions must respond by creating radically different experiences. With this in mind, design students were asked to imagine the campus of the future in Steelcase's 7th annual NEXT Student Design Competition.

Five finalists chosen from 1,042 entries and 76 design programs traveled to Steelcase's Learning and Innovation Center in Michigan to present their design concepts to an esteemed panel of judges.

The finalists not only presented unique, polished designs, they also impressed the judges with their storytelling. Experts from Gensler, The SLAM Collaborative, Ayers Saint Gross Architects, Page and Steelcase awarded Chloe Cudney from Kansas State University top prize.

"I thought 'Wow!' I was so grateful to be honored and to be able to compete against four other great designers with compelling projects," said Cudney. "When people relate to your design and believe in the vision behind it, it's a fulfilling moment because it means the work can have an impact." This is the second year in a row Kansas State has brought home the top award.

While the winner walks away with the biggest prize for themselves and their design program, the annual competition is always about more than winning. It gives young designers and design programs the opportunity for exposure to world-class design firms. Designers receive mentorship, network with one another and gain unparalleled experience.

Finalists: Sean Guirey, Rachel Bahr, Hannah Gilbertson, Reid Thornburg and Chloe Cudney. (L to R)

"We've built the NEXT Student Design Competition program to help elevate the industry. We put students in real-world situations where they are presenting to a client. For many of them, it's their first opportunity to sell their ideas in a professional scenario," said Jerry Holmes, Steelcase Design Alliances principal and competition co-leader. "These students are our industry's future. This competition is about helping them prepare for what's next and giving back to the design industry that we love."

"Of course, we benefit as well," added Denise Calehuff, Steelcase Design Alliances principal and competition co-leader. "What we learn from these students and design programs differs each and every year. The competition helps us stay relevant and expands all of our perspectives."

THE CHALLENGE

For this competition, students were asked to design the NEXT HUB, a small-scale extension of the fictional NEXT University based in Washington DC. The 10,000 square foot space would be on the top two floors of a boutique building. It's intended to be a place for online students to gather, and a space for providing educational opportunities for adults with small children or those already in the workforce. Here's a look at what they developed.

Winner: Chloe Cudney, Kansas State University

Chloe Cudney's Design

Cudney's design concept connected the NEXT HUB's location in Washington DC to democracy in Ancient Greece and the notion of Eudaimonia. Eudaimonia is defined as living well and flourishing. It's supported when people have the freedom to access resources that help them better themselves and find happiness. Her design created a dynamic space that gives students and faculty the freedom to choose what works best for them. Her statement staircase also acts as the learning commons, providing people with landings where they can pause, study or connect.

"Chloe had a distinct voice and point of view that really came through in her sophisticated design. We appreciated her approach to understanding the Washington DC context and how she tied it back to Greece and the seeds of democracy." said judge Deborah Shepley, Gensler principal. "Her storytelling was clear and authentic, and her presentation was personal and passionate."

Hannah Gilbertson, George Washington University

Hannah Gilbertson's Design

Gilbertson came to the competition with a "home court advantage." Because of her close proximity to the space, she was able to visit and use what she learned to create a very purposeful design that maximized the impact of the NEXT HUB's expansive views. Her concept focused on a students' journey through academia from learning the basics to moving into analysis and innovation. She created a warm and inviting space that celebrates this lifelong pursuit.

"We thought Hannah did a really good job speaking to the client's needs," said judge Linnea Kessler-Gowell, Ayers Saint Gross Architects principal. "We loved how she walked us through the design process and always brought her designs back to why they met the users' needs."

"There can be a perception that certain kinds of projects - like education - might not allow for as much design creativity as others," said Gilbertson. "This experience really proved to me that you can create inspiring, interesting and engaging spaces for any type of design project."

Rachel Bahr, University of Minnesota

Bahr's NEXT HUB intended to provide students and faculty with the "path of least resistance" by supporting them no matter what got in their way. She incorporated the concept of "prospect refuge" — an innate human desire to prefer environments with unobstructed views that still allow for areas of retreat. And, her design incorporated elements of aerodynamics to infuse the idea of a streamlined space for learning.

"Rachel's body language was very relaxed and authentic," said judge Jennifer Kirby, Steelcase regional applications consultant, Washington DC. "Her concept was thought-provoking and included a lot of detail, and she was able to explain it with ease."

"This project enhances every work experience I've ever had," said Bahr. "When we were given the same constraints, we all came up with very different concepts. It proves design is not cookie-cutter and everyone can stand out."

Reid Thornburg, Kansas State University

Reid Thornburg's Design

Thornburg's design goal was to facilitate, inspire and create a support system for the new ways people are learning. He called his concept "Education in Motion" and related certain types of spaces to different states of matter (solids = focus zones like the computer lab, liquids = flexible spaces like classrooms, gases = in between areas like the learning commons). His design aesthetic was inspired by Peter Zumthor's bathhouses. Light and water features created a campfire effect and encouraged people to gather, exchange ideas and study together.

"I loved Reid's strong design concept," said Monika Avery, Principal at The SLAM Collaborative. "He took a complex concept and explained it easily. It was evident that each part of his design connected back to his central theme."

"Being able to come to Steelcase allowed us to see a different work environment and bring that back to our school and our internships," said Thornburg. "We got to see that a conference room doesn't have to look like a conference room. The Steelcase experience has been very impactful and inspiring."

Sean Guirey, Kendall College of Art and Design

Sean Guirey's Design

It's crucial for higher education to lead the way when it comes to challenging assumptions and constantly striving for more. Guirey's concept "Problems Demand Change" was inspired by well-known environmentalist David Orr who had given a speech at his school. He created a mix of public and private spaces to let people choose the space that worked best for them and he elevated the active learning experience by putting it on display. Judges specifically loved his maker space. When asked how he came up with such a detailed design, Sean shared that he used to work at the public library and helped start a maker space there where he taught 3D printing.

“Sean’s design solutions were spot on,” said Marissa Yu, Page principal and director of interior architecture. “He could be out in the real world doing this. The flow and how all the spaces worked together was great. We liked how his design showcased the students’ work and made the space very dynamic.”

“One of the things I’ll take away is discovering new ways to engage and interact with clients,” said Guirey. “The storytelling process of design has become more of a collaborative effort between the designer and the client than ever before.”

The judges: Denise Calehuff, Steelcase Design Alliances principal and competition co-leader, Monika Avery, Principal at The SLAM Collaborative, Marissa Yu, Page principal and director of interior architecture, Deborah Shepley, Gensler principal, Jennifer Kirby, Steelcase regional applications consultant, Linnea Kessler-Gowell, Ayers Saint Gross Architects principal, Jerry Holmes, Steelcase Design Alliances principal and competition co-leader, Madelyn Hankins, Steelcase Education general manager, and Sarah Sayeed, Steelcase Workplace consultant. (L to R)

“We were extremely impressed by their collective skills,” said Madelyn Hankins, Steelcase Education general manager. “They should all be very proud. Each student demonstrated tremendous poise and professionalism. I believe the future of the design industry is in great hands.”

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