

# Students Design the NEXT Hybrid Workplace

## Steelcase's NEXT Student Design Competition tested students' skills amidst the pandemic.

Students showed grit, agility and innovation in Steelcase's 8th annual NEXT Student Design Competition. Not only did the students design a future pandemic-aware workplace, they did so while facing the same pandemic constraints they were trying to solve.

"It is so rewarding to see the talent that's out there. The future of design is in great hands," says Jerry Holmes, Steelcase Design Alliances principal and competition co-leader. "It is not lost on us that students and design programs navigated a very difficult year and spent a lot of time working remotely which created unique challenges. But despite these challenges, the end results were exceptional."

Five finalists from California State University - Long Beach, George Washington University, Miami International University of Art and Design and Virginia Tech were chosen from more than 900 entries and 65 design programs. They presented their design concepts to an esteemed panel of judges from Gensler, HOK, Perkins&Will, ZGF Architects, Revel Architecture & Design and Steelcase.

The winner, Jen Khor from California State University - Long Beach, received the biggest prize for herself and her design program, but each finalist and their university benefits from exposure to the world's leading design firms. Students receive mentorship and gain experience from developing, conceptualizing, visualizing and presenting an idea in a real-world scenario.

"These finalists were the cream of the crop. We asked them to sell their idea as if they were talking to real clients. They had to solve their customer's business challenges and connect emotionally to their audience. They did an amazing job," adds Denise Cahuff, Steelcase Design Alliances principal and competition co-leader.

### **The Challenge**

Students were asked to design a satellite office for NEXT, a fictional global technology company specializing in health and wellness. Headquartered in San Francisco, NEXT is opening the first of many planned satellite offices in Atlanta. Along with this expansion, NEXT is also providing a more robust option for employees to work from home and plan future expansions in Europe and Asia. The company wants a home for their collaborative creative content development teams that amplifies the wellbeing of its people and promotes health and safety in the post-vaccine workplace post. Students were asked to consider how the company will connect to its new home in Atlanta and what types of spaces and technology would be needed to prepare the company for a hybrid approach to work that includes people in the office, at home and in satellite locations.

**Winner: Jen Khor, California State University - Long Beach**

Jen Khor joined the judges from Malaysia where she has been learning as an international student for the last several months. It was 4 a.m. her time when she discovered she'd won. Despite delivering her presentation in the middle of the night just a few hours earlier, she didn't miss a beat. "I designed a hybrid office that fosters resilience while honoring the local culture of Atlanta," says Khor. "This is the most well-developed, mature project I've ever completed. This competition taught me so much. It's been an incredible experience."

Khor's design encourages creativity and innovation with agile workplace design and adaptive physical and virtual work environments. She considered opportunities for spontaneous interactions to promote inclusivity. Her presentation walked clients through a day-in-the-life of a typical employee, something that really resonated with the judges.

"I was impressed by her work from the very beginning," says Lina Murillo, Perkins&Will design principal. "Jen had a very strong parti and clear execution of the story. The concept of resiliency and how she layered emotion into architectural forms to define space were beautifully done with a sophisticated palette and attention to detail. Her design really thought about what happens in a regular workspace — from relevant topics such as monitors for virtual connectivity to whiteboards to graphically representing thoughts and ideas. She walked us through every single detail of NEXT employees' experience and what they would see, hear and touch."

### **Sophia DeNezza, George Washington University**

Sophia DeNezza's design radiated out from her monumental staircase, which served as a center point. Expansion represented the growth and forward movement of the company, and allowed her to create spaces that were flexible, collaborative, creative and innovative while promoting the overall wellbeing of the people working there. Judges noted that her conference rooms anticipated hybrid work, which is what design is all about right now. They said the geometry in the space felt very natural and described her design as chic. "Her talent for design shows through even in the smallest of spaces," says Thomas Krizmanic, Gensler studio director. "She used a restrained palette and got a lot out of it. She did a great job not only explaining what was in her design, but why it was there."

### **Maria Rivera, Miami International University of Art and Design**

Inspired by pop art and the Rubik Cube's mechanical system, Maria Rivera's design stood out as unique. She wanted to make every space powerful, playful and interactive — delivering a joyful and dynamic design. Her project included a timeless, colorful palette along with basic geometric shapes inspired by the streets of Atlanta so that everyone who worked at or visited Next would feel like they were in the heart of the city.

"You can tell her designs are intrinsically beautiful," says Scott Clement, Revel Architecture & Design COO and principal. "Her project felt like a space you could actually construct or perhaps already had been built. She thought about all the parts and pieces and used a very sophisticated palette of materials."

## Wendy Uriarte, California State University - Long Beach

Wendy Uriarte’s design is centered around the idea of creating a safe and inclusive workplace that brings people together. Intersecting forms meet at the central open stair connecting the creative, collaborative and rejuvenating spaces. Her colorful logo design for Next also reinforces the idea of connection as a strong element for placemaking and brand expression. “We appreciated the risk she took with bold, strong colors,” says Kim Scott, Principal, ZGF Architects. “Her design had the energy and vibrancy of a technology firm and her presentation was clear and easy to follow. Her preparation definitely paid off.”

## Josie Price, Virginia Tech

The Atlanta Botanical Garden Canopy Walk inspired Josie Price’s workplace design. A winding path links the two office floors and mimics a walk through nature, creating a place of calm and refuge to help people destress and refocus during the work day. Two terraces along the walk provide moments of pause to enjoy the view. The space features natural colors, textures and layered ceiling elements which allude to overlapping trees within a forest.

“We loved that her plans incorporated the terrace and included indoor-outdoor spaces,” says Betsy Nurse, HOK Atlanta’s director of interiors. “After what we’ve all been through in the past year, we’re going to need to inspire people to come back to the office, so we were drawn to her joyful and inspiring design.”

For more information about the Steelcase NEXT Student Design Competition, visit us [online](#).

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