

Creating Community with the NEXT Generation of Designers

Top collegiate designers participate in the NEXT Steelcase student design competition

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Five of North America's most talented student designers shared their office designs as part of the 12th annual Steelcase NEXT Student Design Competition – providing insights into how younger designers envision the workplace of the future.

This year's competition challenged students to create a floor plan for a fictional creative advertising agency called NEXT, across two floors of Chicago's iconic Fulton-Randolph Market District. Students were asked to ground their designs in the company mantra of "Being More Human," which required a strong focus on creating community and inclusive design elements.

The students are judged by an esteemed panel of design leaders from some of the world's most respected and well-known design and architecture firms. From nearly 1,600 submissions from universities all over the Americas, projects are pared down to five finalists, who pitch their presentations to the panel live at Steelcase in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Khendra Thompson - NEXT Competition Winner | University of Wisconsin-Stout

For student designer Khendra Thompson, winning the 12th Annual Steelcase NEXT Student Design Competition involved crafting an inspiring space that celebrates identity and fosters community. Hallmarked with the Matchona Dhliwayo quote, "A garden's beauty never lies in just one flower," Thompson's design embodied the competition's challenge of creating a more human workplace.

How the Design Promotes Community: Centered around main circulation paths to encourage movement, the office features flexible furnishings, integrated tech and workstations with collaboration spaces and private offices nearby. A wildcard gaming space for casual gatherings and a work cafe for employees and clients to mingle encourage a steady interaction flow. A unique, three-tiered monumental staircase serves as a real-life manifestation of the fictional company's three layers of branding – but also offers extra touchdown spots where flexible furniture and options for different postures encourage better conversations.

Most Unique Design Element: The work cafe mimics an indoor garden where plants grow on top of a custom rebar structure. Using rebar in the cafe creates a transparent, exposed and industrial feel – juxtaposing the rigid material with the garden's organic elements. A central fireplace and island encourage people to gather around, sit and connect.

"The idea was to make sure this feels like a central park or garden from the city, brought into the space. Places where experiences can be shared add a human element to the workplace," says Thompson. She adds that the community gaming space is an additional place where "people can connect, share stories, and play games in a pergola-like structure – like in a park or a garden."

“Everything supported her goal of making the space more human. It felt very intentional and specific,” says Caroline Feran, design director for Gensler. “We loved the connection to the humanity in the space.”

Explore Thompson’s Winning Design

Noa Goldberg | University of Manitoba

Bringing community to Noa Goldberg’s space meant tapping into the identity of the Windy City itself for inspiration – reflecting its vibrant nightlife, diverse communities and legendary music scene.

How the Design Promotes Community: Goldberg intentionally created areas that encourage openness, transparency and collaboration. The resource and production room, strategically placed near the monumental staircase (which features a creative water feature), is visible from the rest of the office, and serves as a central hub where employees can meet and work together. Goldberg’s design philosophy follows a more democratic layout where executives work alongside their employees, bridging the gap between leaders and employees. The work cafe sprawls across a staggering two-thirds of an entire floor – prioritizing communal space where creativity can flourish anytime and anywhere.

“The cafe is meant to encourage people to move away from their workstations and have an outlet to come together,” Goldberg says. “It was a pivotal moment in my design because I believe we must offer a workplace of community and connection for everyone.”

Most Unique Design Element: Goldberg’s wildcard space is a music lounge and recording hub that reflects Chicago’s rich jazz and musical history. This space not only serves as a place for commercial and advertising recording but also as a social area where employees can gather and create.

Her research shows she had a good understanding of the city, and her plan had a very thoughtful approach in how she met the client’s needs,” said NEXT judge Tracy Boyer, Principal at OZ Architecture. “I loved her wildcard space and how it relates to Chicago’s jazz history. She created a destination space but also made it multi-use and purposeful.

Explore Goldberg’s Innovative Design

Jacquelyn Guthrie | Arizona State University

Jacquelyn Guthrie’s design for the workplace emphasizes equal access to opportunity and drives social change inspired by the Chicago library system.

How the Design Promotes Community: The space includes social and work zones, with an open, two-level layout connected by a monumental staircase encouraging chance encounters and collaboration. The stairs feature seating, guest workstations, and a private office, fostering a dynamic and interactive environment. Local art from Chicago-based artists enhances the sense of community. The design also features lactation and wellness rooms with lockers, sinks, refrigerators, a calming Himalayan salt wall, sleeper sofa, and library shelving for employees to find respite. Chairs of different heights, textures, firmness and arm features make the space more inclusive. A library team meet space not only serves as a traditional library – but a place of innovation as well. The company book club can meet here – with a cozy atmosphere and a beverage station nearby to bring people together.

As Guthrie explains, “A library is not just a place for education; it’s a vibrant hub of community and culture. It’s a space to gather, meet new people, give back to others, plan, and more. The library provides so much more than just physical books – it provides a wealth of resources that support collaboration and connection.”

Most Unique Design Element: Guthrie’s demo lab is a multifunctional space with a custom pegboard wall and scaffolding that allows for almost unlimited flexibility. People can use this space for events, meetings and showcasing client products, making it a central hub for innovation and creativity. It’s strategically placed at the entrance, reinforcing its importance within the office. It is also connected to the library team meet space.

“The wildcard space (the demo lab) is fantastic and super usable,” says Milena Radakovic, a director with Arcadis in Toronto. “We could see that being used in a real client space today. It’s so versatile and flexible.”

Explore Guthrie’s Dynamic and Inclusive Design

Jade Allen | Virginia Commonwealth University

Jade Allen’s workplace design is centered on creating a dynamic and collaborative environment that reflects the essence of a bustling cityscape and symbolizes the verticality of Chicago’s iconic high rises.

How the Design Promotes Community: It features a collaborative “wind tunnel” space – a nod to the gusty gaps between Chicago skyscrapers. Positioned ideally near the reception and the monumental staircase, the space features banquette seating and slideable tackboards to encourage “quick and breezy” brainstorming sessions. Allen explains, “I wanted to bring the whole city inside,” emphasizing the importance of scale and the concept of the community’s skyscrapers in her design.

The monumental staircase’s seating area spills into a flexible work cafe, accommodating diverse seating options and promoting social interaction. Huddle rooms next to workstations encourage team collaboration, while open high-performance huddle spaces offer an opportunity for both individual and group work. Private offices against the open glass staircase ensure visibility and accessibility to directors and leaders, reinforcing transparency and inclusivity within the workplace.

Most Unique Design Element: The podcast room is a trendy and intimate space that serves as a bridge between generations. It provides a comfortable setting for recording and is part of NEXT's initiative to explore new mediums and engage a younger audience. The podcast room, along with the reflective ceiling and open glass around the monumental staircase, immerses employees in a big-city feel, making this workplace both functional and inspiring.

"The podcast space was very inventive," said NEXT judge Brian Gabbard, associate principal with Page. "There's a flare for the dramatic in this design. We appreciated the thoughtfulness of the pallet expression."

Explore Allen's Bold Design

Ella Beth | Kansas State University

Ella Beth's design honed in on the idea of a visceral and proverbial human gathering tradition –the campfire – to inform her central space where social interactions and ideas are figuratively and literally ignited.

How the Design Promotes Community: The "campfire" area is at the core of the design. Physically located at the center of the entire workplace and opened to both floors, it serves as a socialization and wildcard venue that features an interactive board and a digital screen. A question of the day can be displayed to spark conversations. The work cafe, with its warm wood tones and diverse seating options, fosters a nurturing and restful environment for one-on-one interactions, group conversations and town hall meetings. Huddle and enclosed booths provide calm, focused spaces for escape. With their customizable layouts, neighborhood spaces allow teams to create their own "living rooms," fostering a sense of belonging and collaboration. Lockers and lounges give people a secure place to put their things.

Beth's layout also considers aspects of neurodiversity, with hypersensitive, neurotypical and hypersensitive accommodations, ensuring inclusivity and comfort for all employees.

"I learned a lot about neurodiverse design through this process," explains Beth. "It's important to consider people work differently in different areas and ways."

"Uniquely looking at neurodiversity, it was very respectful to all users coming into NEXT," says Neil Schneider, Principal and director of design at HOK. "The human side was very well articulated in the design."

Most Unique Design Element: The story-sparking space, which functions like a campfire and invites participation and interaction encourages word-of-mouth brand advertising for NEXT's clients and supports community engagement by providing a place for people to discuss topics and explore each other's ideas.

Explore Beth's Engaging Design

Now in its 12th year, the Steelcase NEXT Student Design Competition challenges young designers while giving industry leaders insights into what future designers are considering. Jerry Holmes and Denise Calehuff, Steelcase's design alliances principals, co-lead the competition. They pride themselves on infusing it with new ideas and real-life design rigors each year.

From left to right, NEXT competition co-leader Jerry Holmes, NEXT judges Neil Schneider (HOK), Melissa Holm (Steelcase), Caroline Feran (Gensler), Brian Gabbard (Page), Melissa Black (Steelcase), Tracy Boyer (OZ) and Milena Radakovic (Arcadis), and NEXT competition co-leader Denise Calehuff.

"We challenge ourselves to think of things differently. And all of the student designers rose to the challenge and beyond. They designed spaces that can be built, that are relatable and solve the client's problems and issues," says Calehuff. "I was thoroughly impressed by them, and I'm thankful for them."

Holmes says this latest group of contestants proves the future of design is in good hands.

"Part of the intention of NEXT is to open your eyes as designers to the possibilities of what can happen in the workplace. There are elements of hospitality, community, and everything that must happen in a space."

The judges' say the opportunity to guide, mentor, and – in many cases – learn from the NEXT contestants is invaluable.

"Reflecting on the 12-year history of the event, it's incredible to witness how Steelcase has elevated the quality of design and significantly impacted the professional lives of many individuals," says HOK's Neil Schneider. "Not only are the students exceptional designers, but they also embrace technological advancements and conduct meaningful research. Their professionalism sets them apart and elevates them to a league of their own."

Learn more about the [NEXT Student Design Competition](#) and explore the winning entries. We look forward to launching the 13th annual Steelcase NEXT competition this fall.