



Splash House, a changing pavilion at a Manhattan recreation center designed by students at Parsons Design Workshop.

BELOW: Designer Cory Grosser, left, with Heather Deitch and Jerry Helling of Bernhardt Design, reviewing student projects for a collaboration at ArtCenter College of Design.



MAKING THE GRADE

To give their students a competitive edge, design schools are partnering with major firms on innovative programs that bring real-world challenges into the classroom.

BY TIM McKEOUGH

A blackened-wood credenza encircled by copper-plated rebar, a snaking white-oak bench nearly 10 feet long, side tables made from logs ringed by contrasting layers of resin—these were just a few of the standout creations transfixing visitors at New York’s Collective Design fair in May. Most impressive of all was that they were designed by students from Michigan’s Cranbrook Academy of Art. In a sea of new products from some of the world’s foremost design galleries, the student work held its own.

Recognizing that the transition from school to professional practice is one of the most difficult aspects of a budding designer’s career, Cranbrook is among a number of institutions across the country now running programs to help talented students make the leap from classroom to



studio. The push couldn’t have come at a better time. As designers are being called upon to address an ever-broadening array of projects—not only furniture and interiors, but also electronics, entertainment, social enterprises, and more—these schools are enabling students to look beyond the sometimes theoretical realm of academia and tackle real-world challenges. By arranging exhibitions at design fairs, partnering with businesses and community groups, and providing support and mentorship after graduation, the schools are assisting a new

generation of designers—while also giving them early opportunities to shape the products and spaces around us.

“Bringing the students and their work to a show like Collective Design gets them immersed in that world,” says Scott Klinker, head of Cranbrook’s 3D Design program. Responding to the growing market for one-off and collectible furniture design, Klinker wanted his students to connect with galleries ahead of graduation. “They can see what the market looks like, who the players are, and how that world operates,” he says. For ▷



ABOVE: From left, ArtCenter College of Design students Alex Akopova, Trevor Cheney, Leo Su, Hyein Jwa, and Taylor Cheng with office furniture they designed for Bernhardt. LEFT: Students at Savannah College of Art and Design’s Collaborative Learning Center.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF PARSONS SCHOOL OF DESIGN; FANJOY LABRENZ STUDIO/COURTESY OF ARTCENTER COLLEGE OF DESIGN (2); COURTESY OF SCAD. FOR DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

INSPIRATION

participants like Aleksandra Pollner, who designed the credenza, it proved invaluable. “I met a lot of gallery owners and interior designers,” she says, including many who expressed interest in following her work as she strikes out on her own.

At the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California, the Environmental Design department has a recently launched program with the furniture company Bernhardt Design—students craft new pieces, and the most promising ones get put into production and presented at design fairs like ICFE and NeoCon. “We want to take students through the entire process, from design brief through production, and teach them how to sell their ideas,” says Jerry Helling, president of Bernhardt Design. “They also get royalties, which can help pay off some of their student loans.”

Over the years, the collaboration has produced some of Bernhardt’s best-selling tables and chairs. “It raises the ante and shifts students’ thinking from school mode to professional mode,” says David Mocarski, ArtCenter’s chair of Environmental Design. This year, students developed office furniture aimed at 20-somethings, including a



SCAD’s Collaborative Learning Center.

legless, modular, zip-together sectional sofa for lounging on the floor by Alex Akopova and a duffel-like portable ottoman by Leo Su. “We got honest feedback from a real client, an understanding of how things are really made, and insight into what’s going on in the industry,” says Su.

At Georgia’s Savannah College of Art and Design, known as SCAD, students develop new concepts for some of the world’s most respected companies and institutions—BMW, Google, NASA, and Walt Disney Imagineering among them—through the school’s Collaborative Learning Center. “It’s

real time, real work, real projects,” says Paula Wallace, president and founder of SCAD. “The students use all that they have learned in service design, design management, industrial design, interior design, and architecture. And they gain experience working with people who might one day hire them.”

Recent graduate Olivia West worked on envisioning new immersive resorts for Walt Disney Imagineering in the spring of 2015. Upon graduation that May, she took an internship with the company’s research and development arm before landing a job at Universal Creative. “Imagineering put ▶

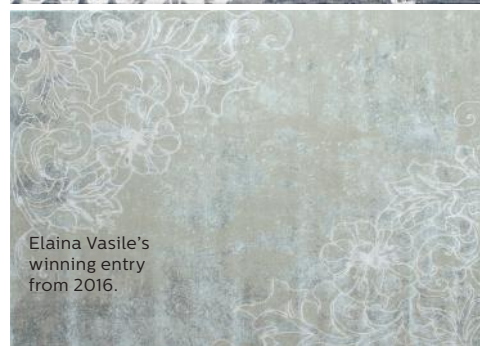
Hohey Jernquist’s winning rug from 2015.



A 2016 winner by Paige Leonard.



Elaina Vasile’s winning entry from 2016.



FLOOR PLANS

When Deborah Hernandez returned to teach at her alma mater, New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology, in 1997, she was given a Herculean task: to spend \$50,000 donated to the school’s Textile/Surface Design department by Nadia Stark of Stark Carpet. Hernandez ended up investing in an annual contest that allows her course’s 30 students to design rugs for imaginary clients and be judged by industry icons, such as Miles Redd and Alexa Hampton. “It’s the most exciting thing that happens during our semester,” says Hernandez, who has assisted several alumni in finding big-break jobs in the industry. Last year, the winning rugs—designed for a fictitious client with a yen for Japanese patterns and the color indigo—were woven into plush reality in Kathmandu, Nepal, by Noreen Seabrook, then auctioned off to benefit the Alpha Workshops. “Whether they win or lose, the pieces become a spectacular part of the students’ portfolios,” Hernandez says.

KATHRYN O’SHEA-EVANS

The exterior of Splash House.



Parsons students at work assembling Splash House.

our untainted minds to work, seeing how we could help propel them into the future of resorts,” says West. “That was a huge stepping-stone. I wouldn’t have gotten this job without it.”

Providing support after graduation, New York’s Pratt Institute runs the Brooklyn Fashion + Design Accelerator, a co-working space with on-site business mentors and manufacturing and model-making capabilities. Members include Pratt alumni and others focused on fashion and home accessories. LuRu Home, for instance, makes products with screen-printed or indigo-dyed nankeen textiles; Snowe is an online retailer of minimalist tableware, bedding, and other home products, produced almost exclusively in white. “We mentor our resident ventures on financials and marketing, but also on

ethical production,” says Debera Johnson, the accelerator’s founder and director. “Most importantly, we have a micro-run production facility.”

Not every program is focused on business development. At Parsons School of Design in New York, the Design Workshop pairs architecture students with community organizations to realize projects focused on neighborhood improvement, such as new changing rooms at public pools. The students design and build their interventions with their own hands to give them a deeper understanding of construction. “It bridges the gap between the conceptual world of academia and the real world of materials, clients, and consequences,” says program director Nicholas Brinen.

“In our other studios, we do conceptual renderings and models,” says Parsons student Mike Thai, who helped build a community garden pavilion in East Harlem this summer. “The Design Workshop is a big eye-opener—it’s that first chance to actually build.” ■



Instructor Adrienne Condra, left, with students at the New York School of Interior Design.

PAPER TRAIL

As the New York School of Interior Design approached its centennial this year, it discovered something surprising: The wallpaper designs that Inez Croom, a former student-turned-interiors whiz (and eventual NYSID professor), created in the 1950s and '60s were being produced once again by Waterhouse Wallhangings, a reproduction firm. “In honor of our big birthday, we thought, Why not give the students an out-of-the-classroom experience by having them recolor the patterns for today’s tastes?” says David Sprouls, the school’s president. That’s exactly what they did, with brand-new colorways for six original Croom patterns, all selected by current NYSID students after a consultation on trending colors with ELLE DECOR editors. “Students got to learn how wallpapers are made in the real world, from production to market,” Sprouls says. “It was a priceless opportunity.”

KATHRYN O’SHEA-EVANS



Wallpapers by Inez Croom, recolored by students. **FROM LEFT:** Arabian Lattice, Growing Nasturtiums, and Forsythia.