

Design Camp

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DESIGN CAMP: SUMMER DISCOVERY, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON/WONDERWORKS



A student who enters college as a prospective English or biology major has a pretty good idea of what he or she's getting into: chances are, that student has already taken Advanced Placement classes in his or her chosen subject. Not so for the would-be architect. Few high schools teach technical drawing; none prepares students to slog through all-nighters in the studio, or to endure withering crits. How can a 17-year-old be confident that he or she will actually like architecture school and succeed in it?

That teenager would find out at an architecture summer camp. These camps (programs, really) allow high-schoolers—and, increasingly, college students and adult professionals—to experience architectural education firsthand for a few weeks in the summer, an appetizer they can try before the main course of a B. Arch. or an M. Arch. degree. Today there are 66 such programs around the country, most hosted by colleges and universities, a few by nonprofits or arts institutions, according to Lee W. Waldrep, assistant director of the School of Architecture at the University of

Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Their popularity has surged: “In the ’80s, there were maybe 20 or 30,” Waldrep notes. This is partly because the schools themselves reap great benefits from the programs—extra revenue, a means of employing graduate students, and, perhaps, a small boost to recruitment.

We sent three reporters to three different campuses, where each of them spent a day learning the design-camp ropes. Read on to see what they found.

These are just three of more than 60 architecture summer programs around the country. For a complete list, visit archcareers.org.

SUMMER DISCOVERY

University of Houston Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, in conjunction with Wonderworks

On the second floor of the University of Houston’s architecture building, Donovan Linsey of Fulshear, Texas, is plotting out floor plans and scissoring cardboard into curlicues. Taking shape in front of him is a model for what’s been billed as an antique car gallery—but this looks more like a U-boat done over by Matisse, a three-dimensional still-life of interlocking volumes. “This is the only place around here where you can do this,” the homeschooled designer says, casting an eye about the studio. And he should know: This is his third summer doing it.

Alongside Linsey are 51 other teenagers from around the greater Houston area, all of them participating in the university’s Summer Discovery Program in Architecture. Now entering its 15th season under director Drexel Turner, Summer Discovery—run in conjunction with the education nonprofit Wonderworks—draws its recruits from local high schools, putting out a call for young people with a creative itch to scratch and without, apparently, any compunction about forfeiting a chunk of their summer vacation.

Not too big a chunk, however. For five weeks in June and July, four hours of studio work under graduate-student supervision follow an hour-long morning lecture. Speakers are drafted from among University of Houston

staff and other local scholars, and topics range from the churches of San Antonio to the canals of Venice. Seven hundred and fifty dollars covers tuition and equipment; an optional sixth week of studio-only work; as well as field trips every Friday afternoon that get the students out of doors and onto the street (and, sometimes, out of town). Admissions are need-blind, and about two-thirds of the class received waivers for the full amount. As Turner puts it, Summer Discovery isn't a "boot camp": "I remember hearing that in Philip Johnson's office the pencils went down at five every evening. People should have a life."

Turner is an architecture educator who knows his way around the profession, especially in his native Houston. Formerly curator of architectural projects at the city's famous Menil Collection, he joined the University of Houston faculty full-time in 1996. "I'd been thinking about doing something [like Summer Discovery] for a long time," and on arrival he set about laying the groundwork.

His Philip Johnson reference is apropos, too, since the College of Architecture itself is a prime specimen from the latter's punched-window neoclassicist interval. Linsey, still carving out the entrance to his incipient car gallery, is candid when asked for his opinion of the building he's spent the past three summers studying in. "I don't care for it," he says.

Today is actually a first for Linsey and his peers, because their 20-something minders will be directing crits, not of the students' completed models, but of their preliminary mock-ups. As the students break into groups of 12-13, Linsey's project sits besides others, some more angular and muscular, some more varied in section; one girl's design for a kindergarten (this week's other elective design problem, along with the car gallery) includes a series of courtyards like those she's seen on a class visit to the Menil Collection.

Leading the review, Rice University M. Arch. candidate Jessica Cronstein pulls no punches. She asks Linsey, "What distinguishes the volumes?" His plan shows a program that wanders through the interior somewhat irrespective of the geometric ensemble in which it's housed. "And where

are the windows?” That one, too, stumps the architect. He hadn’t gotten that far.

It’s tough stuff, the critique process, and one wonders how the kids stick it out—and why. As the program’s creator sees it, it’s not just about exploring design, but about exploring a possible adulthood—a possible life. Turner recalls a group trip to a local architect’s office. When the principal asked if anyone had any questions, a hand went up and a student asked, “What kind of car do you drive?” “That’s the sort of questions these kids want answered,” Turner says.

Not that every student is counting on Gehry-sized success. Leanne Dunn, a rising senior at Pope John XXIII Regional High School in Katy, Texas, has already developed a backup plan: she is owner and operator of the Puppy Love Pet Sitting Service. Her model, another car gallery, takes a cue from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum—but instead of the ziggurat cylinders telescoping one on top of the next, they’re staggered, like a stack of loose change. She says she didn’t want the model to be just a “boring” imitation of Wright.

Attention, firm principals: She’ll be available for hire circa spring 2017. —
Ian Volner

PROGRAM DETAILS

Length: five weeks (9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday)

Tuition: \$750 (2010 rate)

wonderworkshouston.org

DISCOVER ARCHITECTURE

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

A sunny summer day on the University of Illinois’ Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) campus finds a group of 65 high school students ensconced in the top-floor studio of the Ralph Johnson–designed architecture school.

Usually, it’s home to the school’s elite, the graduate thesis students. But for two weeks in July (there’s another session in June, too), these juniors and seniors come from across Illinois—and this particular term, from 14 other

states and four countries—to experience what architecture school is all about.

Lawrence Hamlin and Matthew Niermann, instructors at UIUC, are the day-to-day presence in the studio—and the days are long. Because of the students' young age, every waking minute of their time needs to be carefully structured for the full two weeks. “You give trust, and they step up,” notes Hamlin, although teaching assistants help out during the day and residential advisers deal with the students during the evening hours. Meals are provided, just as in college, and most of the “grownups” attend these as well, to help cement bonds with the students.

The central focus of the program is the design studio; the final project incorporates drawing and model-making skills into a pavilion-type design problem. But instruction in sketching, drafting, CAD, lectures, movies, and a field trip to Columbus, Ind., make for a rich experience that introduces the students to almost every aspect of the profession.

John Henderson is from Chicago's West Side, where he attends North Lawndale College Prep Charter High School. “I like creating things,” he says. The rising senior came to Discover Architecture after designing a house in school that impressed his counselor. Both his high school and the university provided scholarship money so that Henderson could attend.

Monica Scinto is a rising senior at York Community High School in Elmhurst, Ill. Her interest in architecture is broad—“How does this work, what's the physics of it?” she asks. Although the campus is relatively quiet in July, she has definitely gotten a taste of college life. “The dorms are small,” Scinto says, noting that it takes some coordination of sleeping schedules to get along with her roommate.

Chicago native Gabriel Vidal-Hallett attends Walter Payton College Prep and knows a bit about the profession from his mother, who's an architect. That may seem to give him a step up on the others, but, he says, “I've always seen the finished project. I've seen the process here.” And the two-

week session is about a lot more than just design. “I didn’t know about exams, internship, 4+2,” he says. “I’m so much more informed.”

The next few months will see many participants applying to colleges. Scinto is looking at up to eight, including Illinois and Pennsylvania State University. Vidal-Hallett is trying to choose between the University of Michigan and Illinois. Henderson seems most intent on coming back to Urbana-Champaign for the full four years. “We want to help them, wherever they want to go,” says Lee W. Waldrep, who directs the program. “But we want them here at Illinois,” adds Hamlin, with a smile. —**Edward Keegan**

PROGRAM DETAILS

Length: two weeks

Fees: \$1,300 (2010), including room and board

Housing: students live and eat in a supervised residence hall
arch.uiuc.edu

CAREER DISCOVERY

Harvard University Graduate School of Design

On a gray Wednesday in July, the “trays” of Gund Hall—five open, tiered floors of studios that step up to a glass roof—are busy yet quiet, thanks to the ubiquitous earbuds of the iPod generation. Gund Hall is home to Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design (GSD), but these students are not enrolled at Harvard. They’re here for six weeks to take part in Career Discovery, which, at 31 years old, is the granddaddy of collegiate summer programs in design.

A few hours earlier, the students had filed into Piper Auditorium for a lecture by Alex Krieger, interim chair of Harvard’s Department of Urban Planning and Design. Now they are up on the trays, in their cubbyholes, intent on the week’s project: rethinking Government Center Plaza, the much-maligned area of downtown Boston anchored by the Brutalist Boston City Hall. As they sketch, pore over maps, and assemble precarious models, the participants appear no different from their year-round GSD counterparts. Until you notice the age range: this year, Career Disco (as it’s known) has students as young as 18 and as old as 75, according to the program’s director, Jeffrey Klug.

Klug, an architect, has been running Career Discovery for 11 years. He took the job because it seemed like a nice complement to his practice, then he fell in love with it. “We have an incredible student population, and they teach each other a fantastic amount,” he says over coffee in the GSD’s small cafeteria. Not only is the program a relatively low-cost, low-risk opportunity for the curious to try out design school (as opposed to plunking down a semester’s tuition and hoping for the best), it’s great for the two-dozen-plus instructors in the program, all GSD graduates or final-year students who gain valuable teaching experience. Of the 243 Career Discovery participants this year, about one-fourth probably will decide to go to graduate school for a design discipline (at Harvard or elsewhere); the rest who don’t may prove the most effective ambassadors for the program, as they carry what they learned back to their professional worlds of finance, medicine, IT, and education, among others.

Although Career Discovery was initially directed at rising college juniors and seniors, today only 30 percent of participants fit that profile. Among the other 70 percent are many potential career-changers such as Jessica Morris, a high-school sports coach who lives on Martha’s Vineyard. Trained as a painter at the Rhode Island School of Design, Morris is considering applying to graduate school for architecture, so Career Discovery will be a crucial portfolio-builder for her (as it is for many others).

This afternoon, she assembles small pieces of blue foam into a model of a proposed live-work artists’ building for Government Center Plaza, using a piece of yellow string to experiment with circulation paths. Is she worried about embarking on a career as an architect in the teeth of a recession? “Being an architect in a bad economy is maybe a better position than being a painter in a bad economy,” she says. “It’s all relative.”

A few cubbyholes over sits Constantine Lemos of Athens, Greece, a rising third-year architecture student at Oxford Brookes University in Oxford, England. For Lemos, Career Discovery is a chance to sample an entirely new education system. “I wanted to see how the American system works, and try to compare it with the British system, and think about my future,” he says. On the strength of Career Discovery, the U.S. is winning out.

Instruction here is “more down-to-earth, more real,” he says. “Which I really like.” — Amanda [Kolson Hurley](#)

PROGRAM DETAILS

Length: six weeks

Concentrations: architecture, landscape architecture, urban planning, urban design

Tuition: \$2,760 (2010 rate)

Housing: available in Harvard Law School dormitories at an additional cost

gsd.harvard.edu

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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