

Perspectives

By Paul Hosford

An exciting step forward

It was quite the experience. A group of people from three local communities were assembled on the bridge spanning the moat at the Stuhr Museum listening to UNL Architecture professor Martin Despang's 15 students explain their ideas for our future before they began their tour of the grounds.

It seemed appropriate that we examined each of these concepts on a bridge. We were not only bridging the past and the future but also bridging the generations.

Martin's students are devoting a full semester to working with Boone County to generate new ideas for "pioneering the future." Each has created a 3 foot by 2 foot four-panel graphic presentation that expressed 1) their initial impression of Albion, 2) something that was here but isn't anymore, 3) something about the community that caught their attention, and 4) an innovative precedent from someplace else that could be adapted to this area.

Expressing ideas in visual form is the foundation of every architectural project. In this case the project is our community, and the displays showed images ranging from the combine demolition derby to the Dairiette, the Courthouse and the Gateway Theater. By the end of this semester, three-dimensional models will have evolved from these initial concepts.

The talent it took to create each display, coupled with the creativity of the underlying concepts, made them stand out as genuine works of art.

One by one, the students stepped forward and explained why they had chosen the images on their intricate displays. One young woman used something I had written -- that the road to the future begins with a vision -- as her starting point. She began her project with an image of an eye, the quintessential symbol of vision, and then proceeded to illustrate her own.

All the students' visions were amazing and each demonstrated a genuine interest in our area. The students clearly appreciate that to move forward we must remember -- and honor -- our past. They spoke of such things as "intelligently integrating" new concepts and designs into our community. But they weren't sentimental -- one pointed out that the pioneer past was anything but the "Good Life." There were droughts, prairie fires, locusts and blizzards. Another wisely pointed out that a balance must

be struck between preservation and innovation, reminding us that clinging too strongly to the past will stop us from embracing the future.

One display focused on our values. Its creator was especially impressed by how community members on the students' initial bus tour pointed to so many landmarks with an obvious sense of pride. She was also impressed with our traditional values, illustrated in part by the number of our churches. And most of all, she was impressed by our sense of trust, illustrated by the fact that we don't have many stop signs in our downtown -- she pointed out that we trust each other to "do the right thing" not only when driving but in many other areas as well.

The concept of sustainability came up repeatedly. Our area needs to sustain a viable population and conserve our natural resources. The concept of integrating new designs into the existing environment was also explored -- building from local materials in ways that reflect this area's characteristics.

The downtown was a primary focus; ways to redevelop the living spaces above our existing buildings were discussed by several students. Another student pointed out there were once many more trees in the downtown and suggested ways to "re-green" the area. Yet another showed how another community has created ornamental gardens in empty buildings.

Most of all, though, these bright and perceptive young people focused on the need for spaces that draw people together especially to enjoy the arts. They are well aware that technology is isolating people. They have looked at our past and found example after example of people coming together to enjoy music (such as around the bandstand that once stood on the courthouse lawn) and would like to see that happen again.

The students understand that communities are made up of people, not buildings. But buildings serve the needs of communities and if properly designed, can do much to strengthen the ties among people by giving them places to gather.

There is much more than I can describe in this space. All 15 students' designs will be on display soon in Albion at all four banks and City Hall. I would urge everyone to take a moment to view them -- they are inspiring signs of things to come.