

# Catholic University, DDOT Team Up for 'Information Hub' Initiative

Student Designs Get Put to Public Use

BY HUNTER L. GORINSON

In the coming months, a few lucky undergrads from Catholic University's School of Architecture and Planning (CUArch) will see their plans leap off the drafting board and into the real world.

More than 100 students enrolled in CUArch's Comprehensive Building Design Studio (CBDS) are in the midst of a once-in-a-lifetime competition for the chance to design a "public information hub" at one of three prominent area locations – the Eastern Market Metro, the Navy Yard or the Southwest Waterfront. Think of it as a "Project Runway" for the architects of tomorrow – and both the student body and surrounding citizenry are eagerly awaiting its outcome.

## Refining the Concept

Impressed by a series of purely hypothetical "transportation hub" proposals that CUArch students prepared in 2009, the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) came back to the university for help with yet another joint venture. This time, however, they were interested in more than an academic exercise. They wanted public pavilions that could provide DDOT information to residents and tourists alike, while doubling as all-purpose gathering points that, in the words of the CBDS, would serve as "an emblem of the nature and character of the culture they serve." Hence, the information hub concept was born.

"[DDOT] were going to buy a unit in the Capitol Hill area, since right now they only have a tent. We thought, 'Well, why not just do the projects?' It all came together at the same time," said CBDS Director and architect Rauzia Ruhana Ally.

Drawing inspiration from the Capitol Hill Business Improvement District and Sign Tiger-sponsored Saturday information booth at Eastern Market, CUArch recruited a group of community stakeholders – including

the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions 6B and 6C, Barracks Row Main Street, the two above-named groups and sundry others – to monitor the student's progress.

After a full semester of prep work, the 30 CBDS teams – identified by faux design firm names like re+act and MUTATIO – unveiled their rough concepts to those stakeholders this past February during the project's first major review. During the four-hour long program, the students also fielded questions and criticisms from jury panels of established DC area architects. In the end, these two groups, along with another DDOT-appointed panel, will help narrow down just which designs win out.

"As a juror, what we're looking for is a distillation of their research. Some of the projects did a great of almost putting a book up on the wall that would walk you through the project page by page," said Troy Urman of Sorg Architects, who has been a volunteer peer reviewer at CUArch for the past two years and has participated in the information hub design review.

"[They need to] tell a background story about what they've found there and then a compelling story about what they can do to improve the place," he said.

## Not the Average Tourist Kiosk

Meeting that task head on, the student teams' designs showcased a wide breadth of influences and styles with various teams citing everything from angular German bus shelters to the Union Station rent-a-bike depot as influences. It may be the work of largely untested novices, but it still made a big impression on some of the stakeholders present.

"Some of them are taking an approach where it'll not only provide information but in itself be an outstanding architectural element ... I



LEFT  
1. The MUTATIO team's preliminary concept for an Eastern Market information hub.

BOTTOM  
2. CUArch's Turf design team faces a jury evaluation of their Navy Yard proposal.

began looking at it as much more than a hub or information booth. It actually could be a draw in itself, something that could stand on its own just by being there," said local activist Chuck Burger, who sits on the CBDS/DDOT project panel and whose Sign Tigers group was established with the express intent of making way-finding around Eastern Market easier for newcomers.

With no architects to pay, the cost of realizing that goal will be a relatively modest \$100,000 per hub – a price tag that provides for on-site amenities like interactive digital displays, exhibition space for materials from the DC Archives and small, wi-fi capable cafes.

Per the arrangement reached between DDOT and the university, half of that sum will be drawn from the agency's "performance parking" revenues, culled from recent meter fee hikes in the hub areas. The remainder will have to be raised by community organizations and individuals, which Burger thinks can be easily accomplished – at least in Eastern Market.

"We have a general commitment from those in our group, like CHAMPS (Capitol Hill Association of Merchants and Professionals) and Barracks Row Main Street," he said. "I've talked to some of the neighbors on D Street and Eighth Street who are very much in tune with the plaza ... and they're incredibly excited about it."



## A Pre-Graduation Résumé Booster

Before work can begin, however, the vying teams will first undergo further reviews of their redesigned and refined project plans throughout the spring, eventually culminating in a final selection for all three sites on May 6. Still, in the view of those students, the long hours and laborious revision process will be well worth it should they wind up with one approved project in the pipeline before they've even earned their diploma.

"That would be the coolest thing in the world," said 21-year-old senior Jennifer McAllister, whose Axiom team is hard at work on their Eastern Market hub concept. "The opportunity to be able to go out into the job field and say, 'I have this building that I helped design, and it's going to be built,' is incredible." ★