

Building Better Cities



*OU's Urban Design students
take community needs to heart
as they grow efficient cities
with a human touch.*



Tulsa's H.A. Chapman Centennial Green spent most of its life as an underused urban park.

The green space, which includes a fountain, small amphitheater and oval lawn, is located near Sixth and Main streets and was built in 2008 with \$3.8 million in Vision 2025 funding.

"It didn't seem to draw anyone to it other than the homeless and people letting their dogs relieve themselves," says Katie Wing, a second-year graduate student in Urban Design Studies at the University of Oklahoma - Tulsa.

That changed earlier this year when the park received a makeover and became the home of "Prairie Schooners," an art installation by Patrick Dougherty. The piece features seven structures of woven sticks, branches and saplings that are close to 20 feet tall.

Wing managed the communications for the project and coordinated the volunteers who built the sculptures.

"That took a surprising amount of coordination beyond getting the artist committed," Wing says. "The city was involved, the arts group that commissioned the artist was involved, as well as the surrounding business owners."

Wing and her colleagues in the Urban Design program all have different undergraduate backgrounds. Together they form an interdisciplinary team that

BY MICHAEL AVERILL



works on real projects in the community as part of their coursework.

“Urban design doesn’t just look at the buildings or landscapes or streets individually. It looks at how everything interacts and how it can be beneficial to the community,” she says. “Most of the population is moving into urban settings and I think it’s important to pay attention to how that gets developed.”

More than 50 percent of the world’s population lives in cities. In the United States, that jumps to 75 percent and the need for creative collaboration among city planners is greater than ever. Urban design, by definition, is an intersection of disciplines that are involved in the creation and growth of a city —architects, planners, engineers and real estate professionals.

Studio work

The Community Health and Environmental Design Studio on the OU-Tulsa campus is home to the urban design graduate program, which is led by Shawn Schaefer.

“We are trying to create a community of urban designers in Oklahoma that all speak the language of urbanism and can work together to create a better city and quality of life for its citizens,” Schaefer says.

“Cities are recognized as the economic engines for the economy of the country and the world.

“We would like to improve the quality of life for people in the city by design.”

The studio is geared to train urban design professionals through service learning with community-based projects, like the work Wing and her classmates did on Chapman Green.

“The park, in fairness, was never completed. It was built as part of the Oklahoma Centennial and didn’t have any programming funding. With this project the students wrote a grant for programming,” Schaefer says.

The students created a scale model of the park and surrounding area that allowed partners in the community to visualize and experiment with different ideas.

Other projects that students in the program have worked on over the years include the “String of Pearls” project along Route 66 from downtown to Yale Avenue, featuring a redesigned streetscape, and “Kendall-Whittier... On the Go,” an active transportation program for the area and its elementary school.

Ed Sharrer graduated from the urban design program in 2007. He worked as a city planner with the City of Tulsa be-



Sue Vanderford, left, a member of the Landscape of Hope steering committee, uses an interactive model built to allow citizens to share their ideas. OU Urban Design Studio team members Robbie and Katie Wing (center) were among the team that is helping the City of Muskogee rejuvenate its downtown.

fore taking the position of executive director with Kendall Whittier Main Street, a nonprofit aimed at restoring the Kendall-Whittier area as a thriving, walkable commercial district.

During his time in the program Sharrer focused on commercial growth in midtown Tulsa while making sure it didn’t encroach on surrounding neighborhoods.

“These neighborhoods have charm and dense character. As that part of Tulsa began to grow and thrive, there was pressure to accommodate commercial growth without sacrificing the character that made it such a great place to live,” he says.

The recommendations the group came up with helped influence what would become the City of Tulsa’s Utica Midtown Corridor Small Area Plan.

“It was really meaningful to know that the work you’re doing isn’t a lab exercise,” Sharrer says. “You’re not creating abstract ideas. This was real work with a real, tangible influence on things. It was everything we could have hoped for as students.”

Expanded opportunities

OU’s Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture recently expanded its degree options and includes a Master of Urban Design graduate program, the only one of its kind offered in the state. The college is also offering a Certificate of Design Entrepreneurship and Real Estate.

“All along my idea has been to create a community of urban designers so that Tulsa is known as a place with good urban design where people want to come and live and work because it’s so well designed,” Schaefer says. “That can be done with our graduates — our planners, our developers, our engineers and our architects.”

Michael Averill is a reporter for the Tulsa World.