

(Very Young) Architects Wanted

The event: The celebration (and judging) of the Orange Line Design Competition, a program sponsored by the Community Design Resource Center of Boston (CDRC) and by Citizen Schools, a national organization that partners middle school students with professionals in many different fields. For the past ten weeks, groups of students from a dozen Boston middle schools have been working with volunteers from local architecture firms and architecture programs to re-design the area around an Orange Line station — either the Jackson Square or Sullivan Square T stop. The winners chosen tonight will go on to meet with Boston mayor Thomas Menino about their project.

The setting: The ballroom of the student center at Northeastern University. The windows face out on a Boston winter dusk: the pale luminous turquoise of the John Hancock tower against a darker turquoise sky. Twelve tables line the walls, each labeled with the name of a Boston middle school and the architecture firm partnered with it in the competition. At the back of the room are more tables, where refreshments are being laid out; at the front is a stage with a podium, where someone is testing the microphone.

4:40 Two women from Gund Partnership walk into the ballroom carrying the large pieces of their group’s site model of the Jackson Square area, which they proceed to fit together, jigsaw-puzzle-fashion, on the table assigned to them. “Does this section go here?”

The model is larger than the tabletop. “Let’s angle it like this.”

Amid the little cardboard buildings are photos of the students in the group, who attend Irving School, diagnosing the area’s problems in comic-strip speech bubbles. “THERE IS A LOT OF LITTER THAT NEEDS TO BE CLEANED UP.”

“THERE IS TOO MUCH VIOLENCE IN THE AREA.”

4:45 The first group of students arrives, and the kids spot their school’s name on a tabletop sign. “Wow — that’s ours!”

As they speed toward the table, the teacher calls out, “The food in this room is for later, OK? I want to be sure you understand: *Those are not our cookies.*”

4:50 More architects have arrived and are setting up boards. The room is filling up with kids as well, some in T-shirts and jeans, but some boys wearing coats and ties, and some girls in satin blouses, velvet dresses, silk shorts. A teacher from Edison Middle School helps a boy with his tie, murmuring reassuringly, “Remember, this isn’t a prepared presentation. We’re just going to talk about what we’ve been talking about for the last ten weeks.”

4:58 An architect is taking tiny trees out of a box and dispersing them around a model of Sullivan Square, while her colleague places an extremely large exuberant “T” sign near the subway stop. He smiles. “This project is more about signage than anything else.”

“Is this something?” The first architect, finished with the trees, holds up a loose piece of styrofoam.

“It was, until they got rid of it.”

5:02 An architect waiting for his school



▲ Photo by Joan Wickersham.

group to show up addresses the kids at the next table, who are waiting for their architect. “So guys, do you like architecture?”

“Yes!”

The architect grins. “Awesome.”

5:15 The room is filling up fast now. Architects come in holding site models and posters above their heads, so they won’t be jostled by the crowd. At the front of the room a slide show is running: snapshots of the students and architects working together over the past ten weeks. Every now and then there is a scream from somewhere in the room, as kids catch sight of themselves on the screen. The judges are gathering in the center, squinting at handouts that explain the rules. The panel is made up of educators, government officials, activists, business executives. A lot of them know each other; the mood is relaxed and friendly. Two get into a conversation about casino gambling, currently a hot political issue in Massachusetts. “Why make it easier for poor people to lose their money?”

“Well, especially when we already do that with the lottery.”

5:30 John Werner, executive director of Citizen Schools Boston, booms out a welcome over the microphone. “And we’ve assembled the best set of judges this side of

the universe — *American Idol* has nothing on us!” He sends the judges upstairs for an orientation meeting.

5:32 On the stair, former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, now affiliated with Northeastern and here tonight as a judge, falls in beside fellow-judge Ted Landmark, president of the Boston Architectural College.

“So how’s school?” Dukakis asks.

5:35 Upstairs, Brandy Brooks, executive director of the CDRC, welcomes the judges and reviews the procedures. Each team will have five minutes to present to the judges, and each pair of judges will evaluate six teams.

5:45 On their way back to the ballroom, the judges are asked to put in an appearance in a lecture room where a large group of students is presenting an environmental project they did as an alternative to the design competition, measuring the carbon footprint of their schools. The student at the

podium announces: “We hope you enjoy this video. We made it because we are interested in the environment.” He adds gravely, “Please turn off all cell phones and pagers.”

5:54 The judges re-enter the ballroom. “So what do we do, again?” one whispers to another.

5:56 Two judges approach the table where a group has set up a site model of Sullivan Square. “Hi, folks,” one judge begins. “We’re supposed to be judging this group. You’re our first, so we’re practicing on you guys.”

The noise level in the room is so high that the two students presenting have to practically shout to be heard.

One points to a big “T” carved out of styrofoam. “This is our sign.”

“If you’re looking for Sullivan Square, you can see the sign and know where it is.”

“So help me get oriented here,” one judge says. “Where’s the highway?”

An aerial photo of the highway, mounted on cardboard pylons, has been resting on the model, but a boy nervously removed it

when the judges approached, in an attempt to give them a better view. “Put the highway back,” one of the architects gently suggests.

6:02 The conversation continues, with the judges prompting students to articulate the concepts underlying their scheme. “Tell me about these orange gateways.”

“Those are our gateways,” a student says. Then adds: “To help pedestrians see where we are.”

“So you think a major problem here was visibility.”

The student nods.

“And let’s see — you grassed over a parking lot, and moved the parking underneath the highway?”

An architect explains that the team came up with two concepts — one having to do with signage and the other with parking.

The judge smiles, and says to the kids, “So essentially you took the best of two schemes and melded them, without too much bloodshed.”

The kids nod solemnly.

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6:05 Over the noise of the crowd and the music, John Werner's voice comes over the microphone. "OK, judges, time to move on to your next group!"

6:07 Two judges stand in the middle of the floor, poring over a diagram of the room and their assigned judging circuit. "Are we supposed to be moving east or west?"

6:10 On the other side of the room another group begins shouting their Jackson Square presentation to two judges, who lean forward, straining to hear. "We wanted this to be a fun, safe place to play, so we put in a rec center and a movie theater. Now you don't have to travel downtown for entertainment," a boy explains.

A girl adds, "And there are a lot of working families in the area, so we put in a daycare center."

6:17 The kids in one group are all wearing large round black construction-paper eyeglasses. "Why?" a judge asks. "Because we're architects!"

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6:26 A Sullivan Square presentation, featuring a design where the doors in the building open in sync with the doors of the arriving train. "I got the idea from the Georgia airport," a student says.

6:35 A team is presenting their Jackson Square design to two judges, one of whom is former governor Dukakis.

"I live right here in this building," a girl says, pointing to the model. "And I see a lot of litter. So I think more trash cans are a must."

"Litter? Who's going to pick up all that litter?"

The girl looks startled.

"We all should," the governor says. "I do."

6:40 Over the podium microphone, John Werner asks the judges to come up onto the stage. He thanks everyone involved in the competition, and acknowledges the wildness of the last forty minutes. "The judges must feel like they've been drinking Jolt. But remember this is the first time for us. We're going to figure this out. And we want to keep bringing people together — not just architects and planners, but real estate developers and investors who want to intersect with young people." He encourages the students, whom he refers to as "apprentices," to continue with architecture. "And we're proud the mayor let us influence a project that's actually going on. Our apprentices don't pretend to have better answers, just a different perspective."

6:50 Brandy Brooks speaks of the goals and benefits of the competition. "It allows bright young designers to figure out how to be active partners with the next generation. Good design isn't frivolous or decorative — it affects how we all work, play, live, and get around."

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6:56 The next speaker is a young woman named Norma Fevrier, currently attending the BAC on scholarship. “Architecture is hard work, but I enjoy it. I don’t have a problem with the fact that I’m not sleeping — OK, it’s three in the morning, but I’m having fun.” She ends by saying, “No matter what your problems and difficulties, don’t give up on your dreams. There are always people to help you.”

7:10 John Werner asks all the apprentices to come onstage, and reads off a list of finalists — a list consisting of all twelve schools that participated in the program. Each name is met with happy yells from parents and friends standing somewhere in the crowd. Werner introduces Kairos Shen of the Boston Redevelopment Authority (“He designs Boston!”). Shen: “I’m here to represent the mayor, and to say, ‘Wow.’ We’re supposed to think outside the box — and you aren’t in any box.”

7:17 Michael Dukakis: “I’ve met at least six future governors here this evening.”

7:20 Ted Landmark: “We’re grateful to you for the ideas you’ve come up with. When you’re ready, we want you to come to our architecture schools, because you’re going to improve the city.”

7:25 Werner announces the winning design: “Irving School and Gund Partnership. You’re going to meet the mayor!” Everyone in the room cheers.

7:35 Upstairs at the VIP reception, John Werner asks the judges for feedback. One judge speaks up immediately: “The judges need more time to spend with each project. The work deserves it. There is a lot of depth here.”

Werner acknowledges that this is true, and says that next year more time will be built into the schedule. He thanks the judges and invites them to submit more comments on feedback cards. “Really — let us know what worked and what didn’t. We want to improve. To take this event and make it intergalactic!” ■

Editor’s note: The architects and schools participating in the Orange Line Design Competition were: BH+A with McCormack Middle School, Dorchester; BosNOMA with Mildred Avenue Middle School, Mattapan; Boston Architectural College with Edison Middle School, Brighton; Cubellis with Edwards Middle School, Charlestown; Deborah Drew Design with Wilson Middle School, Dorchester; Gund Partnership with Irving Middle School, Roslindale; Harvard Graduate School of Design with Citizen Schools’ 8th Grade Academy, Roxbury; Icon Architecture with Rogers Middle School, Hyde Park; Jones Lang LaSalle with Mario Umana Middle School Academy, East Boston; KlingStubbins Architecture with Mario Umana Middle School Academy, East Boston; Payette with Mildred Avenue Middle School, Mattapan; and Shepley Bulfinch with Gavin Middle School, South Boston.

Joan Wickersham’s new book, *The Suicide Index*, will be published by Harcourt in August.

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