

...campus

by Juanita Dugdale

Watershed in the Windy City

The School of the Art Institute dives deeper into design education.



Last spring, a dozen jet-lagged students, just back from Italy, convened on a Chicago street corner to compare notes about the Milan Furniture Fair, identical bright green hard plastic cases in tow. This was no ordinary luggage; more the stuff of troops in convoy formation. Each case carried computer equipment or customized fittings used to deploy Watershed, a high-tech booth representing the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) at the Milan fair's young designers' exhibition, Salone Satellite.

SAIC's team, 12 students and three faculty members from different design disciplines, turned their exhibit space into a refuge, weather station, and recording studio. An organic roof-like structure of plastic petals lit by LEDs responded to shifts in Illinois weather patterns with a light show of colors, shapes, and sounds based on meteorological data beaming in. Even if visitors didn't grasp that this highly engineered construction made palpable the connections between sister cities Milan and Chicago, they were eager to pick up a free bottle of mineral water outfitted with a custom-designed funnel top for tap refills.

More than an exercise in student ingenuity, Watershed represents a new initiative starting to play out on a grand scale at SAIC. The project tested students' abilities to plan a massive undertaking, work resourcefully as a team, marshal technologies, and exploit their own specialties.

An appetite for advanced design training based on collaborative activities has been grow-

ing at SAIC for some time. While its design programs have always been a mainstay, the school is better known for traditional studio arts, a curriculum SAIC has offered since it was founded in 1866 and one that has produced such notable artists as Georgia O'Keeffe and Thomas Hart Benton. This year, however, SAIC initiated three new graduate degree programs: Master of Architecture (MArch), Master of Interior Architecture (MIA), and Master of Design in Designed Objects (MDes). The degrees are administered by AIADO, a reinvention of the school's interior architecture department, which now folds architecture, product design, and other specializations into a curriculum emphasizing transdisciplinary studies. To plan this unique suite of programs, Linda Keane and Anders Nereim, both of whom are architects on the faculty, spent nearly a decade researching other graduate design curricula and consulting key advisers about tailoring an education to 21st-century concerns, sustainability among them.

In July, AIADO welcomed 32 students into the new graduate programs, kicking off with a summer intensive. While a number of students have a studio art or design background, the majority arrived with undergraduate degrees in subjects such as French literature, astrophysics, and psychology. Expectation is that the diverse experiences of mature adults (most are over 26) who have strong academic backgrounds will more than compensate for what the students lack in technical and critical skills. The AIADO

programs are furthermore designed to help them quickly fill gaps in their knowledge.

Awaiting the newcomers is a unique "cluster" format that replaces the tutorial approach more typical of SAIC's MFA programs. Whereas the school's art students traditionally work on self-generated projects in consultation with an adviser, AIADO's professional degree candidates will attend classes in each of the three degree programs, which are team-oriented or team-taught to foster exchange among disciplines. The curriculum groups these classes together under flexible themes to provide a focus for each semester. In the first semester of the MDs program, for instance, a student working in the open-ended "Situations" cluster takes a core studio course called "Evident Objects." There, a typical assignment might be to design a communications device that the consumer can either easily recycle or return to the factory so that data retrieved from the memory might prompt the manufacturer to fine-tune production methods. Students can also take one elective per semester from any department: They might learn ceramics technology for a special prototype or experiment with a digital jacquard loom to weave copper into antennae.

The design initiative's most ardent champion is SAIC's president Tony Jones, a dapper scholar who is also the Art Institute's co-chief executive officer. The school has benefited from his intimate knowledge of Chicago (he was SAIC's president in the 1980s and returned in the mid-'90s,



Watershed, an installation by SAIC students, changes color in response to Chicago weather conditions. The project hints at the creative synergy fostered by the school's new graduate programs in design.

after serving as director of the Glasgow School of Art and rector of London's Royal College of Art). In the past decade, the campus expanded to 900,000 square feet, including new dormitory space in the downtown Loop area that has reinvigorated the neighborhood. Jones scored another real estate coup by securing the 30,000-square-foot top floor of Louis Sullivan's iconic Carson Pirie Scott building as AIADO's new headquarters, now known as the Sullivan Center. There, students can fabricate or render almost anything they dream up, thanks to abundant digital equipment, output devices, scanners, and laser cutters, plus a wood shop and a mold-making room with vacu-forming machinery. By 2007 a CAVE (computer-aided virtual environment) will arrive, which, along with outside manufacturing partnerships, will facilitate ambitious prototyping projects.

The Sullivan Center is all the more salubrious because it occupies a prime site in the Loop, close to three SAIC academic buildings, two residence halls, and the Art Institute's encyclopedic collections. Only steps away lies Millennium Park, Chicago's popular new public space on the edge of Lake Michigan, the ultimate urban art playground.

Town and gown relations go even deeper since Tony Jones enjoys a collegial relationship with Mayor Richard M. Daley, who is determined to make Chicago the greenest city in America. The recent arrival of Joseph Rosa, hired last year to become the Art Institute's John H. Bryan

Curator of Architecture and Design, will also help fuel the design initiative's momentum by expanding the museum's architectural focus. The Art Institute's crowning achievement will be Renzo Piano's new North Wing, scheduled to open in 2009.

AIADO is now invested in projects that support sustainability and global responsibility. While much of the credit for this goes to Mayor Daley, whose Environmental Action Agenda has become a model for cities throughout the U.S., another source of inspiration is Bruce Mau, the Toronto-based designer, scholar, and creator of the exhibition and book *Massive Change*. Mau's connection to the SAIC program has deepened since Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, which is mounting "Massive Change" in the fall, asked the Watershed team to reconvene to develop a companion show.

It's too soon to predict what breed of designers the new initiative will produce and how they will compare with their peers. The nearby Illinois Institute of Technology, for instance, with the largest graduate school of design in the country and strong ties to industry, champions strategy and innovation as key study areas and even offers a joint MBA degree. SAIC professor Helen Maria Nugent, coordinator of the Designed Objects degree program, assumes that AIADO's professional graduates will contribute to design in their own way, owing to the school's unique character and its relationship to The Art Institute. She points out that artists tend to ask

unpredictable questions and operate independently of the norm; design students can't help profiting creatively from working closely with them. Ultimately, though, AIADO's educational mission is less about free expression than investigating both the local and global impact of design.

Many years ago, the late Victor Papanek wrote that "designers have become a dangerous breed." His 1971 book, *Design for the Real World* accused the profession of negligence, stopping just short of demanding a cease-and-desist order. The only way to clean up the mess we've made, Papanek claimed, is to insist that schools do a better job of preparing young designers for responsible global citizenship. R. Buckminster Fuller chimed in, blasting "omni-specialization" while advocating for deeper research that will make design "an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool." Sound familiar? Chicago may be known for its tempestuous climate but at SAIC the winds of change are blowing steadily in the right direction.

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