

April 7, 2003

Architecture students to help give The Ave a makeover

Steven Goldsmith

Now that utility and paving crews have given "The Ave" a new foundation, University of Washington architecture students are about to give the shops a facelift.

Fifteen architects-in-training will spend the next 10 weeks designing new storefronts as part of the revitalization of the struggling shopping area along University Way Northeast.

"What we want to do is enhance the quality and identity of The Ave," said Jim Nicholls, the architecture lecturer who will lead the studio. "It will be — appropriately enough for an area with a university heritage — a vision that comes from students."

The students will work out of what they call the Storefront Studio, in the heart of the U-District in the former Tower Records store (across the street from University Book Store). There, they will study the present-day Ave, envision an improved streetscape and collaborate with interested landlords to redesign the facades of their buildings.

The studio also will serve as a public showcase for design ideas and community open houses. The first open house will be this Friday from 4-6 p.m.

Unlike many student projects, this is no theoretical exercise. It comes with real clients and real budgets in the form of a \$70,000 Fa?e Improvement Program fund for building materials administered through the city of Seattle and distributed by the Greater University Chamber of Commerce. The students' design work is free to the businesses, and Nicholls hopes some of them will spend the summer helping build the facades they designed in the spring.

Theresa Doherty, assistant UW vice president for regional affairs, said the project puts campus brainpower to appropriate use.

"This is a good example," she said, "of where the university brings its academic capital for the benefit of the U-District."

But far from imposing academic notions upon the community, the architecture students will collaborate with merchants and “dream a bit with them,” Nicholls said. Each storefront will be different, but students will try to define an overall “character” of The Ave — based on its heritage and identity — which could be expressed as a set of informal design guidelines complementing the city’s land-use code.

In addition to helping neighborhood merchants and training future architects, the project is seen by UW officials as highlighting the university’s positive impact on the neighborhood at a time when the city is being asked to lift a so-called lease lid that limits the size of university operations outside the campus walls.

As a second phase, architecture students may explore the impact of potential UW outreach offices in the U District — possibly even at the Tower site itself — for such uses as the UW Extension or public-policy centers of the Evans School of Public Affairs. Using current land-use codes and design guidelines for the area, the studio will look at how additional UW uses could contribute to the neighborhood.

In any event, Nicholls said the students are so excited to work on a real project, benefiting their own neighborhood, that he had to open extra spaces in the graduate studio to accommodate the demand.

“It’s such a natural fit,” he said, “in so many ways.”

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For more information, contact Nicholls at (206) 616-4366 or jnicholl@u.washington.edu, or Doherty at (206) 221-2603 or tdoherty@u.washington.edu. Friday’s open house will be at the studio headquarters, 4321 University Way N.E.. Special public displays also are planned for the University District Street Fair May 17-18.

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