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### Teach kids good design, and they'll grow up to value it

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by Whitney Gould

They're everywhere: sprawling mega-mansions with a veritable mountain range of gables, or a jumble of roof types (Prairie, mansard, hip) and a galloping parade of pseudo-Palladian arches, or a patchwork of too-small (or too-big) dormers and bays. Sometimes you see the entire unholy mess slathered onto a single house. It's the architectural equivalent of a banana split crossed with a club sandwich.

How did the landscape come to be littered with this stuff? ("Junkitecture," a design maven friend of mine calls it.) More to the point, how to encourage the opposite - thoughtful, well-proportioned, handsomely detailed buildings that people will enjoy for generations?

I'm convinced that part of the solution lies with basic education about design. It was a high-school class in architecture and city planning that sparked my own lifelong interest in what I now write about for this newspaper. But when was the last time the average school kid learned anything about principles of scale and proportion, mass and materials, solids and voids? These days, we're lucky if the financially strapped public schools even have art classes.

Mark and Linda Keane are trying to change things. The Milwaukee couple - he's on the architecture faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and she teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago - have put together an inventive, interactive program in design education, "Next," aimed at middle schoolers. Using a mix of online resources and hands-on activities, the program helps kids understand how design shapes everything from buildings and transportation to appliances and Web sites.

Drawing on examples from nature (a shell, a spider web, a rose petal) and manufacturing (a Coke can, a paper clip, a hair dryer), the Keanes teach students to think about perspective, shape, proportion and composition. They use a bingo card to illustrate details in the city grid; they employ teapots to spark discussion about ornament and materials; they take kids all the way from starting a sketchbook to designing a building. The idea is to raise the level of architectural literacy so that design becomes a valued part of society, in everything from the way housing is created to how cities are planned.

"You can't wait until people are adults to get them to realize there are design choices out there," says Mark. "In Europe they start teaching this stuff in grade school."

Part of the problem in this country, Linda adds, is that even when it survives, art education generally has a narrow focus. "It doesn't get into environmental issues and sustainability, and it should," she says. "The end game of design is sustaining a healthy life. We don't have to settle for (a landscape of) strip malls and parking lots."

The Keanes have no illusions about revolutionizing design education overnight. Right now a version of their curriculum, which is underwritten by UWM, the Graham Foundation and the School of the Art Institute, is incorporated into classes at just five middle schools here in Milwaukee (Hartford Ave., MacDowell, La Follette, West Side Academy and Audubon). But the Keanes would like to expand it eventually to K-12 classes and engage

schools nationwide.

(For more information you can contact Mark Keane at (414) 229-5236 or [keane@uwm.edu](mailto:keane@uwm.edu); e-mail Linda Keane at [lkeane@artic.edu](mailto:lkeane@artic.edu); or click on the "Next" Web site, which is still under construction: [www.next.cc](http://www.next.cc).)

The Keanes aren't the only ones trying to raise consciousness about design. The American Architectural Foundation and the Chicago Architecture Foundation are also working to develop a K-12 curriculum on the built environment.

"We're not trying to create young architects," says Ron Bogle, president of the American Architectural Foundation ([www.archfoundation.org](http://www.archfoundation.org)). "We're just trying to instill curiosity and create awareness about design. If we don't invest kids with a sense of ownership about the places they live in, we'll all be living in big-box towns where our senses are deadened and the spaces are horrible."

Bogle, a former school board member, is well aware of how overburdened teachers are these days. That's why the new curriculum will be designed for use in after-school and community-based programs as well as in classrooms.

AIA Wisconsin, a society of the American Institute of Architects, is trying to do its part, offering a tool kit that architects can use when they're asked to make presentations in schools and to programs arranged by community groups such as Junior Achievement. For more information, call AIA Wisconsin at (608) 257-8477.

If enough efforts like these take root, perhaps someday there will be a critical mass of people insisting on graceful, enduring buildings -the stuff of memorable communities. Goodbye, junkitecture.



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