These sixty people were different from the others squeezing into the Merchandise Mart on that Tuesday morning of NeoCon. A specific purpose drove them. They came to think. Plan. Create. Deep down, they came to succeed at something few of them had attempted before.

They arrived at Suite 622 to invest their day in the International Interior Design Association’s 2018 Student Design Charette. In its seventh year, this annual happening delivers a capstone-like event to a hand-picked group of participants culled from 3,200 student IIDA members.

Here were 60 design minds, educated by 53 design schools, randomly distributed among 12 teams, given a design problem and five hours, 30 minutes to solve it, then present their solutions to a jury of four design luminaries.

The day’s agenda, plus food and drink to keep those design minds nourished, was orchestrated by a group within the IIDA’s headquarters. Ryan Ben, Student Engagement and Advancement Manager, was the charette’s showrunner. He was in perpetual motion on the day, from welcoming all who entered and answering questions from student designers, to managing the procession of team presentations. Mr. Ben began work in January to make this day’s flow of activities a success.

“This year we made a point of including students from a greater variety of design schools than ever before, so these 60 IIDA Student Members come from across the country,” said Mr. Ben.

That was a break from the selection process of prior years in selecting just one nominee per school, in most cases, instead of two or more nomi-
nees. The 2018 Look Book, a directory of the participants, reveals the group’s geographical diversity.

This year’s 60 charrette participants included 10 winners from regional competitions and student chapter charrettes, plus the IIDA Student of the Year. The IIDA filled the remaining seats with students picked from 103 nominations by 23 IIDA chapters and 53 schools and universities.

“We’ve assembled 12 teams of five members each who’ve not met before,” said Mr. Ben. “They’ll meet each other when they arrive and find their places.”

Finding their places meant coming to the Mart’s sixth floor, where a specially-arranged market suite awaited them. Entering by ones and twos and threes, the student designers overwhelmed the room’s silence with voices, motion and excited laughter, humanizing a circumstance meant

10:00 a.m. Team 2 discusses their design solution, with two members gone on the hunt for products and materials.

Thanks to Joey Ruiter’s encouragement, some student designer added an eleventh Design Tenet to Herman Miller’s list of ten.

With no computers in sight, student designers brought everything needed for presentations done old-school style. Image: Chris Dilts
10:04 a.m. Using sticky notes. Team 4 identifies locations for each of the six spaces defined by the design problem.

10:15 a.m. Team 6 sorts through wallpaper patterns available from the supplies table set up for use by all of the teams.

10:43 a.m. Team 9 confers over the floor plan of Suite 622 while their design solution evolves.

12:46 p.m. Team 6 grabbed lunch from the sandwich buffet at the back of the room and continued working. Other teams did the same.

12:27 p.m. Team 8, foreground, and Team 9 deep into executing their solutions near the stage where they'll present to the jury.
events

for testing their creative mettle. And test it would, old-school style. Without computers, plotters or scanners for support, the students packed in supplies as if staging a design revolution.

They brought everything: T-squares, scales, triangles, markers, tracing paper, even a watercolor set. They pressed that and more into action during this accelerated charrette, a time-honored practice that has changed with the times.

The long history of the charrette begins with 19th-century student architects and their last-minute scrambling to finish their works before the handler of the cart wheeled their projects away to be graded. The French word for ‘cart’ is charrette, and the name stuck.

By the mid-20th century, a charrette meant racing a project to its deadline by sequestering a team of mostly re-

12:47 p.m. This Team 7 member amazed charrette observers with her skilful use of watercolors under the time crunch.

12:48 p.m. When tabletops fell short on space, the teams employ floor as worksurfaces for large-format work.

1:41 p.m. This member of Team 11 continues hand-rendering for his team’s presentation board as he has for the past hour.
cent hires and interns under orders to stay on the job until its finished.

Credit for sourcing the origins of the charrette belongs to David Willis for his 2010 essay in Harvard Design Magazine. He found today’s charrettes emphasize teamwork, collaboration, planning and problem solving. But he concedes that the old way had its virtues.

“I am led to conclude that aspects of the old, end-of-project charrette as a design process remain relevant and viable,” wrote Mr. Willis. Improvisation and working with what is at-hand symbolize the old charrette, while the new version is driven by idea generation.

Generating ideas within a team of strangers and under time pressure holds peril for experienced professionals, not to mention student designers. This consideration was in the minds

1:12 p.m. With her sample run complete, this member of Team 2 reports on her discoveries.

Team 7 finalizing their presentation as Ryan Ben, the day’s showrunner, cues teams with minutes remaining. Image: Chris Dilts
of design educators doing this year’s nominating.

“Our design faculty took a holistic approach, said Genell Ebbini, Assistant Professor at University of Minnesota’s College of Design. She is a Leed AP BD+C and ID+C with memberships in the IIDA, ASID and IDEC. “We wanted a candidate with an ability to think the design through, to think independently, take risks, feel safe with choices, and do all this with a professional presence,” she said.

Professor Ebbini, who specializes in applications of sustainable ideologies using evidence-based design, believes the student design charrette broadens a student's ability to grasp the scope of the design industry. That reasoning helped guide the faculty’s nomination decisions. “We wanted someone with design maturity, who could see the project individually and as a team player.”

For Jessica Feggestad, Interior Design Program Director at Madison College, this was the second year her school made nominations. Madison’s IIDA Campus Center was established in 2017, explained Ms. Feggestad, who holds memberships in IIDA, ASID and IDEC.

“Few student-level competition experiences exist where they have to draw upon all of the skills they know from their design education on the spot,” said Ms. Feggestad. “Students have to use their interpersonal skills from schooling and life to implement a project quickly, within a team they’ve just met.” Still, they can communicate through a design vocabulary.

“No matter what college they are from, these student designers are working through an iterative design process,” said Ms. Feggestad. “They are making sketches, bubble diagrams, schematic plans, and then we see them assembling it more formally in their presentations, at least as best you can in a day.”

She believes the variety of styles students bring to the charrette enriches the experience. “Every school has a different style, a unique take on design processes, be it the tools students use or the presentation style they choose, and that makes it interesting to watch.”

A student nominated by design educator Lisa Tucker Cross, Ph.D., provided a real-time assessment of the day’s intensity. Dr. Tucker Cross teaches interior design at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh – Online Division.

“I spoke to Dawn Turner, and she was eager, nervous and excited,” said Dr. Tucker Cross. “She told me, ‘I’m having a blast; this is wonderful’” Ms. Turner was on the team whose project would later receive the People’s Choice award. “I’ve never had a student come back with a negative experience.”
She is one design educator among many who encourage design schools to nominate Student IIDA members for the charette. “It’s a great experience, good for their resumes and excellent all the way around.”

At nine o’clock, the room fell quiet as Ryan Ben began the 30-minute kick-off program. He laid out the day’s sequence and introduced four speakers from two of the three sponsoring organizations. These professionals spoke to the assembly as peers, suggesting how this day will add wind to the sails of their careers.

Marybeth Shaw, speaking on behalf of the Wallcovering Association, the day’s Bronze Sponsor, gave context to the interior design degrees these students are pursuing. “Interior design makes architecture usable,” she said.

Ms. Shaw drew on her position as Wolf-Gordon’s Chief Creative Officer, characterizing what materiality does for interiors. It contributes to “site specificity” by making spaces unique within their contexts and among their users. She closed with something akin to a benediction in creativity perhaps to nudge this group of soon-to-be specifiers away from Instagram-ready concepts. “Enduring works have their strength in conceptual truth.” That, she said, “is what moves design forward.”

Herman Miller’s Amy Storek, Vice-President of North America A+D Sales, spoke about her employer’s long-standing commitment to innovative design and relationships with inventive designers. She reminded the students that career paths in the design industry lead in many directions, such as commerce which has been her path. “Design and design thinking,” she said, referencing IIDA’s Design Manifesto, “is everywhere, it is central to what we at Herman Miller do. It embraces inclusiveness and diversity, and it unifies.”

Marc Gierz, Senior Design Exploration Manager for Herman Miller, discussed creating products, introducing the firm’s Design Tenants as he went. Historically, Herman Miller’s process exhibits rationality and curiosity in due measure, making for a product range that works functionally and emotively. In his role, Mr. Gierz mediates between those designing products and those who will build them. Where needed, he encourages solutions that preserve a product’s design essence while ensur-
ing it can be made into something producible at volume.

Consequently, he said, “What we’re after is a product that has not one molecule more than it needs, nor one molecule less than it needs.” Herman Miller was the Platinum Sponsor and Charette Administrator.

Effectively using his speaking minutes, Joey Ruiter, owner of jruiter I.D., provided the morning’s big takeaway with a campfire moment. “You’re here to show us what makes you, you,” he said. Mr. Ruiter and three others would later judge the 12 teams’ work.

Mr. Ruiter explained what he does with design briefs, as someone who makes objects for people to use. “I take them as a mild suggestion.” To hone his point, he added, “You have to take every project and make it your own, add your own point-of-view.”

Those words closed the kickoff program, at which point Mr. Ben turned the teams loose on the quest for a design solution.

Quest indeed, as NeoCon itself provided the seed from which the design problem sprouted. The operative statement within the narrative given to the student designers read, “Imagine an environment that highlights the variety of human activities you’ve witnessed during NeoCon: making, learning, collaborating, marketing, engaging and socializing.”

That was the charge to the 12 teams for ensuing five and one-half hours. Aside from the programmatic features, teams had to script a part for each team member in a five-minute oral presentation.

The boards they worked on for hours needed to support their presentation with a floor plan, sketches, renderings, with specifications for materials and FF&E. Oral presentations to the jury would follow at three o’clock in the afternoon. The room’s noise level spiked as the 12 teams launched into their work.

These 60 design minds have an education in design skills and thinking that is useful to their tasks only if that training could be creatively applied. How that happens is becoming clearer because of discoveries by cognitive researchers about creative thought.

Because the brain is an electrochemical organ, the diagnostic features of the EEG and MRI usefully measure electrical and chemical activity. Researchers using these methods suggest that creative thought occurs dynamically within identifiable networks involving specific regions of the brain. The researchers found that creative thought comes about when the brain summons existing experiences and imagery, then sorts or manipulates them into novel ideas.

These innovative ideas have to be fighters, as it’s believed that uncreative ideas have dominance within the networks. One study concluded that “increased creativity of ideas may reflect an increased exertion of processes that inhibit dominant but uncreative ideas.” That might be described conversationally as one’s point-of-view, an important, desirable trait in designers that takes many forms.

At the Winner’s Reception, Ryan Ben, the IIDA’s Student Engagement and Advancement Manager, introduced Patricia Rotondo, IIDA, who discussed the winning presentations. Image: Chris Dilts
One of the charette jurists, Primo Orpilla, FIIDA, believes some student designers have already found their “design voice.” He said, “It may come in the form of their stylistic voice,” but he encourages listening before putting pen to paper. “Before laying down lines,” said Mr. Orpilla, who is co-founder and principal of Studio O+A, “listen to clients’ needs and be appropriate to that – one’s style will still come through.”

Likewise, appropriateness can embrace the abstract and the extreme. Charette jurist Joey Ruiter made that point by invoking the late motorcycle daredevil, Evel Knievel. “He was amazing when his stunt succeeded, and tragically awesome when he crashed.” Remembering that Joey Ruiter’s portfolio includes vehicles built to go fast calibrates how he gauges a designer’s derring-do.

Charette jurist Jason Hall views intentionality as a calibrating factor designers should express in their work, a sometimes cumbersome task for teams. “One of my interests in the student design charette was the result teams of five would create,” said Mr. Hall, creative director and partner at Charlie Greene Studio.

In a fitting summation, Patricia Rotondo, IIDA, senior principal and director of design at Antunovich Associates, implored these 60 student designers to realize the uniqueness of their charette experience. “For them to have their first charette at this age is incredible,” said Ms. Rotondo. “My first charette came about eight years into my career.”

She applauded the time and effort by the IIDA staff to make the event happen with so much realism, with student team members meeting each other and getting to work minutes later. “You go to a site, you don’t know anybody, you’re thrown into the mix and you have to make the best out of it.”

In reviewing the presentations, jurists had to verify that each team used Living Office Materials from sponsor Herman Miller, one product from a Wallcoverings Association member, also a sponsor, and specified one-quarter of the wall systems used from...
Reception Sponsor, DIRTT.

The guidelines for jurists to follow in their evaluations included problem solving. Primo Orpilla connected this criterion with the fundamentals of the charrette process, describing its usefulness in blending the art with the science of design.

He suggested that design problems often call for solutions to many sets of problems, the risk being that design teams can lose perspective. A charrette with well-defined goals, such as the one conducted by the IIDA, focuses a team on generating solutions.

The design concept criterion resonated with Jason Hall, who said, “I was impressed with the clarity of the purpose and the intentionality of each of the teams.” Mr. Hall added that this was a quality he hoped to see in the presentations. “I wanted to see a consensus around a strong idea within each team, where each of the members built on it.” The most successful among the projects were those that carried “strong intentionality” all the way through.

The tests in the creativity criterion evaluated the team’s composition of presentation, solution and story. Joey Ruiter’s approach here centered on the newness that student designers brought to the charrette; he says his mind’s accumulation of details about furniture design has its utility, but he can “ignore all those lines of data” when starting a new project.

Mr. Ruiter describes his beginning points as “fresh takes” and “reboots.” He believes the world needs designers to stand out. “Without the freedom to express yourself and explore, what do you have?”

Ultimately, the jury awarded First, Second and Third places, with a People’s Choice award determined by popular vote of NeoCon attendees.

The student designers were honored that the IIDA’s 2018 Member of the Year was on the jury hearing their
presentations. Accordingly, comments about the three awarded presentation from Patricia Rotondo appear here.

The First Place award went to Team 7 for “Linked Area Ware,” a solution the team described as “making critical connections between artists and buyers.” Ms. Rotondo said, “Not only did they develop a 2D presentation, but they brought their concept to life in 3D and, then, in 4D using materials, textures, patterns and colors composed on their presentation board.”

She concluded her comments by saying “Everything was seamlessly connected not only between the project and the end user but also intertwined within the design solution.”

“Alluvial” earned the Second Place award for Team 5. “Through their juxtaposition of the seating elements, they developed a program that used the great-room concept,” said Ms. Rotondo.

“Here they’re drawing people from one place to another, each with different seating vignettes.” She added that they were able to tell their story effectively by intertwining it through the plan, elevation and materials. “They did a good job with their plan and the different seating arrangement in the space.”

Team 8 received the Third Place award for “Roll and Press,” a space they described as “felt being made into beautiful things.” Ms. Rotondo said their board stood out from the others due to its composition.

“How they integrated their idea into their board, showing the bubble diagram development into the plan development, the vignettes in the space, was beautifully composed.”

Team 1 took the People’s Choice award for “Working Well.” On Wednesday morning, NeoCon attendees cast their votes at a display of the 12 presentations set up at Herman Miller’s third-floor showroom.

DIRTT Environmental Solutions was host and sponsor of a gracious reception and awards presentation for all who participated in the Student Design Charette on Wednesday afternoon at their Wells Street showroom.

Hearing one student designer’s reaction to the charette experience makes it seem like a thrill ride. “It was many emotions in one: a fun, unforgettable, overwhelming sensation,” she said. Maybe that’s how the IIDA promotes the 2019 charette. ■

Studies mentioned in this article:


IIDA Student Design Charette People’s Choice Award, Team 1, from left: Sarah Love, University of North Texas; Meredith Verzino, Kansas State University; Dawn Turner, Art Institute of Pittsburgh – Online Division; Estefany Inzunza, San Diego Mesa College; and Stephanie McShane, New England Institute of Technology. Image: Chris Dilts