

North Dakota Museum of Art

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McCanna House Explorations of Studios and Living Spaces by North Dakota State University Architecture Students

In the fall of 2011, the third-year architecture students from North Dakota State University's Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture traveled from Fargo to McCanna, North Dakota to visit the site of the North Dakota Museum of Art's newest venture, McCanna House. Margery McCanna Jennison had willed her ancestral home to the Museum to develop as an Artist-in-Residence colony. Situated on ten acres thirty-five miles west of Grand Forks, the 1920 French-style country house was built by Joseph Bell DeRemer, one of the region's first architects. The students were charged with designing combination studio and living spaces for visiting artists. The studios would be nestled into the shelterbelt surrounding the ten-acre farmstead.

Over the course of the semester, the students developed their ideas and presented them as their final project. The proposals, which include both sketches and models, will be unveiled to the public during an opening reception on February 12 at 2 pm, in hopes of sparking a discussion among interested citizens and regional architects. The exhibition will be on display through March 20, 2012.

Laurel Reuter, Director of the North Dakota Museum of Art, joined the students at the McCanna property on a splendid October day. She outlined the project. The studio should be on the ground floor and a modest living space on the second with sleeping quarters, a bathroom, an efficiency kitchen or kitchenette, and some storage. There were few restrictions. Because the cottage-like buildings would be situated in a grove of trees dominated by cottonwoods, she wished them to consider designing a sleeping porch on the upper floor. The students spent a couple hours poking into every corner inside and outside the house. Gradually they staked out the sites for their imagined cabins before going home to begin drawing.

Associate Professor Regin Schwaen who moved to the United States in 2000 taught the class and accompanied his students to McCanna. Previously, he taught for five years at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Denmark, spent two years practicing in Berlin, Germany, and then opened his own practice in Copenhagen. According to Schwaen, "As an architect and a teacher in architecture I was very happy to be able to create a task within the academic realm with focus on different arts. Together with North Dakota Museum of Art we decided to have third-year students at NDSU create separate cabins for a musician, a writer, a sculptor, and a painter. Most students had never before thought in those dimensions, to design rooms for the arts."

Brittany L. Taplin summed up her experience, "As third year architecture students we work on two to three projects per semester and typically create models and design boards for each one. For our final project we designed artist-in-residence cabins for a farmstead in McCanna, North Dakota. Our goal was to create living spaces, which could be used for many different artists. Our studio class of seventeen went to the museum to speak to Laurel Reuter, the museum director, and visited the site in McCanna."

"I loved this project. For a typical studio project, we have a real site, but the client is usually imaginary. In this case, we had a real client, Laurel, who we could talk to and ask specific questions. She could describe to us what she envisioned. It is also nice to know that our project could be inspiration for the architect who will be hired to ultimately design the final artist-in-residence spaces."

If one of the student designs were to be adopted, a North Dakota licensed architect would have to head up the project. Case in point: In 1981, at age 21, and while still an undergraduate at Yale University, Maya Lin won a public design competition for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, beating out 1,441 other competition submissions. A blind competition, the contest entry displays were identified only by number, and the panel unanimously chose entry No. 1026. Subsequently, student Maya Lin, while the designer of the Wall, assisted the architect and his team of engineers for the actual construction on the site.

Casey Cotcamp said, "As architecture students we were fortunate to have this opportunity to develop for a real client, to take into consideration what an artist really needs, and build our designs based on that." Erin Saarela reiterated, "This project was interesting because we were able to deal with an actual client. Being able to visit an existing site with a lot of history was inspirational for our designs." Holly Burley summarized, "It was nice to work on something that was realistic and not as conceptual." Matt Fremstad said, "It was exciting to be a part of a project that generates interest into what will hopefully become an actual project that will greatly benefit the North Dakota Museum of Art.

Finally, Matthew Weiss said, "For myself, the most important part of this assignment was the realness of the project, the program, and the clients. It had a closeness to my heart; I really strove to make it feasible. The program was as near to real as we've been assigned thus far. There was this push that we've been yearning for in previous projects, the simple fact that our clients were actually looking for an idea to be built down the road. I guess one could assume that we are very fond of our renditions for the McCanna House Artist-in-Residence project."

This exhibition introduces the models, photographs, and plans created by the students. An abiding theme throughout the work is its subtle reference to the all-encompassing and absolutely level plane of the surrounding land. Regin Schwaen, himself from Denmark, noted that "to bring artists to a house that is placed as an object on this exceptional flat landscape will be a unique experience for most artists who will visit McCanna House and the future cabins or studios. Nowhere else can one experience a horizon that perfectly horizontal and a sky that big."

The North Dakota Museum of Art is located on Centennial Drive in Grand Forks. The Museum hours are weekdays from 9 – to 5 pm and weekends from 1 pm – 5 pm. The Museum Shop is open during these hours. There is no general admission, however there is a suggested donation of \$5 from adults and change from children. Also the Museum Café is open for lunch, weekdays from 11 am – 3 pm. For more information call 701-777-4195 or visit www.ndmoa.com.