

A Unified Space

Landscape architecture students connect community, place, history

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By: Chris McLean-Wheeler

Students from Andrews University will assist in the landscaping of [Benton Harbor](#)'s planned Morton Hill Welcome Area. Wightman and Associates are designing the Welcome Area sign and surrounding seating area, but Andrews University students will be crafting the landscaping portion of the project.

This unique opportunity was made possible through correspondence initiated by [Robin Johnson](#), assistant professor of architecture, after she learned of the upcoming project. Johnson, who co-teaches a junior studio class with [Garth Woodruff](#), assistant professor of horticulture and landscape design, suggested a partnership between their class and the city of Benton Harbor.

"I developed a way to fit it into the spring curriculum, agreed to take on the project for the town and Morton Hill and here we are," remarks Woodruff. The students involved in the project are Tyler Young, Anastasia Ronenko and Vitally Kuchmel.

"Our role is to design a space around an intersection that is trafficked by both foot and vehicle that enhances the signage and the history of the place while providing a park setting," Woodruff explains.

The intersection is located on city-owned property on [Territorial Road and Paw Paw Avenue](#).

“We will pick up all the pieces in place and pull them together into a unified space that can connect people to the place and its history,” adds Woodruff. “Our goal is to engage in creating a safe, connected environment that enhances the local tradition and engages the community.”

One thing landscape architects are passionate about is making sure all work they do is in partnership with the local landscape, not against it.

“Where an architect stops with the envelope of a building, a landscape architect picks up,” he says.

Landscape architects will work on anything from the size of backyards to states. They work with park systems, waterfronts, environmental design and remediation, parking or trafficked areas and more. Woodruff comments that landscape architects are often the glue that brings the disciplines together.

“Benton Harbor is one of the remaining walkable communities,” said Woodruff. “Our students now get to help that experience be a pleasure rather than a necessity for someone without a car.”

Corey Bell, president of the [Morton Hill Improvement Association](#), explains that their goal is to take advantage of the underutilized properties on Morton Hill.

“It’s just a vision,” he says. “We want to employ our imagination and not lock ourselves into a traditional way of thinking.”

In addition to the Welcome Area, Bell mentioned other ideas for the location, such as adding houses for artist studios.

“The process is fascinating to watch,” comments Woodruff. “As this is ongoing, we will digest nature, human interaction and art to produce amazing possibilities.”

He estimates that the design process will be completed mid-spring 2017, but the construction start date is not solidified yet, as there are many factors involved, including price. Funding for the Welcome Area will come from part of a \$50,000 grant from the [Michigan Department of Natural Resources](#), received in fall 2015.

Assisting community projects is not new to Woodruff’s department.

“We have folks walking through our door at all times looking for help from our department,” Woodruff remarks. “Projects like this and the opportunity to give back to our community with our talents is amazing. To be able to offer connectivity to nature to a community or the celebration of their history along with a safe, enjoyable environment is an honor.”

More information about this project will be available on the Facebook group for the organization, [The Morton Hill Improvement Association](#).

For more information about landscape architecture at Andrews University, visit andrews.edu/agriculture, email agriculture@andrews.edu or call 269-471-6006.

Related Links

- More about the [Morton Hill Improvement Association](#)

- [Department of Agriculture](#) at Andrews University
- [School of Architecture & Interior Design](#) at Andrews University

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