

Architecture Students Design University Campus

Martin Smith's students help Colombian school in relocation

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Photo courtesy of Martin Smith, assistant professor of architecture

By: Sam Fry

Corporacion Universitaria Adventista (UNAC), located in Medellín, the second largest city in Colombia, is relocating its campus to a rural area as part of the institution's 2020 development goals. UNAC is one of 15 Seventh-day Adventist universities in the Inter-American Division. Citing the expenses of maintaining a campus in an urban area, university administration made the decision to relocate the campus. Assisting in the design process of the campus relocation is a team composed of Andrews University School of Architecture students, led by Martin Smith, assistant professor of architecture.

"They are trying to develop a university program that in many ways returns to the original concept of Adventist education—that is its education of the whole person: the mind, the spirit and the body," says Smith.

UNAC's decision to relocate has not been without resistance—but the board was adamant that the school needed to return to the original intent of Adventist education.

“Seventy years ago it used to be a rural area, but now it’s in the city,” says Cesar Rojas, one of the Andrews University architecture students involved in the project. “There are lots of distractions. When you look at the course of Adventist education, one of the ideas is to be in a rural area so we don’t have all of those distractions around us, and we can focus more on what’s important—including more manual labor and agriculture.”

Once the development goals were set and the relocation decision finalized, UNAC contacted the Andrews University School of Architecture.

“They were aware that we had done a master plan for Andrews two or three years ago, and they were looking for something similar,” says Smith.

Smith and the students involved are primarily working on programming, since a site for the new campus has yet to be chosen.

“We are devolving the building program to meet their education program,” says Smith. “The administration there has worked through their education goals and the mission of the university, so now we are helping them turn their educational goals into building program goals.”

Some of the students are working on the project as practicum training, while others are doing it as elective credit.

“Right now we are in the very early stages of programming,” says Rojas. “In the future, what we hope to do is to include more students in the process and have the Urban Design Studio class design the actual master plan for the students attending the school there in Colombia.”

One of the biggest challenges that the design team faces is the lack of a physical location, since UNAC has yet to purchase and designate a site for the relocation.

“It’s difficult trying to put plans into place without a specific location,” admits Smith. “All of our work at this point is generic because we don’t have a specific location to design around. Not having a site or a property is a challenge, since it’s impossible at this point to create a plan that is responsive to specific site conditions.” says Smith.

The team faces other challenges such as working remotely and communicating with UNAC during the design process—challenges that Smith feels are insignificant.

“All of these are little hurdles, and I don’t think any of them are insurmountable,” he says with a shrug. “We are looking forward to how this might develop over a longer term.”

To combat these difficulties, the design team made a weeklong preliminary visit to UNAC the week before Andrews University’s classes commenced. During this time they met with administrators, faculty and students and toured the existing campus and surrounding areas.

“It’s extremely important for us to be able to see the local area, to be able to get an idea of the environmental and cultural context of the environment that we are working in,” says Smith. “Site visits are essential to being able to design under local conditions.

“As an architect, and as an Adventist architect, this is really a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Smith continues. “I’m not aware of any other new campuses being developed. Professionally, it’s exciting to be involved in the planning of a new campus. It is exciting for us to be able to put the way we teach into practice.”

The project has provided a source of publicity for Andrews University’s School of Architecture, both inside the Adventist community domestically and abroad, and reflects the manner in which students are instructed.

“We try and focus on the concept that buildings should be designed to be part of a community, rather than as isolated objects,” Smith explains. “We think that fits in with the idea of stewardship of resources, being good citizens and respecting culture. All of those concepts come together in the way we way we try to teach students.”

“Altogether it’s a big move,” says Rojas. “Moving requires lots of work, and there is some resistance—but keeping the mission alive means that sometimes we have to move, and there is a lot of potential here.”

For more information about the School of Architecture, visit andrews.edu/andrewssaad, email saad@andrews.edu or call 269-471-6003.

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