

Renaissance Kids Architecture Camp 2020

Involving students in 18 states and four countries in its first-ever virtual format

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A Renaissance Kids participant demonstrates her creative process. (Photo by Mark Moreno)

By: Hannah Gallant, University Communication contract writer

This past summer, the Andrews University School of Architecture & Interior Design held their 14th annual Renaissance Kids architecture camp, a unique program filled with many creative projects. The theme, “Kids Making a Stand,” referred to the main project of designing and building lemonade stands and was inspired by Heather Shelby, director of Kidpreneur Camp.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year’s Renaissance Kids took a new form—the “Household Edition,” a remote learning but hands-on experience for kids ages 5–16 to learn about architecture, art and design. The program ran as an online monthly subscription for June, July and August. Participants had the option to sign up for any or all of the months.

Subscribers had online access to creative challenges, educational tutorials and resources, and live Zoom engagements with Mark Moreno, founder/director of Renaissance Kids and associate

professor of architecture. Moreno was joined by a variety of professional guests and his team of Andrews University architecture students: Dorcas Hakiza, Maryza Eguiluz, Jenalee Holst and Isaac Wood (Isaac's wife, Emony Wood, assisted as well).

Over the course of the summer, Renaissance Kids had multiple participants from 18 total states in the U.S. and from four other countries: Canada, Greece, Mexico and South Africa.

“After realizing remote learning was inevitable, we first had to decide to run the camp or not. We then worked hard to build it in a way that stayed true to the core principles that make Renaissance Kids what it is: community-oriented collaboration, problem solving from multiple vantage points, and using our hands to test ideas in varied drawn and built ways,” explains Moreno.

In order to prepare for this new version of Renaissance Kids, Moreno and his team created a new website, filled it with resources, planned a new curriculum, secured part-time help, shifted their advertising and payment processes, and learned about and subscribed to Conceptboard, a web-based whiteboard environment where the kids upload images of their work.

Moreno and his team met with the kids every Monday, Wednesday and Friday in Zoom to review their works in live critiques to promote creative development of project activities. They also provided live tutorials to support ongoing projects.

“In some ways, the program has been deeply enhanced by being online for the fact that we can call up guests from all over the world. The guest series became a reality when my architect colleague, Tom Lowing, inspired us by a Zoom visit on our first day,” explains Moreno. “He critiqued the floating slabs projects, the students liked it, and we made it a goal to expose them to more real world projects and professionals.”

Over the course of the summer, the kids had live tours of architects' private homes and landscapes in Fort Worth, the new Disney Star Wars Hotel in Orlando, and mixed-use urban buildings in Washington D.C. and Pittsburgh. They even had an architect in Rome give them a bike tour of the streets and a quick walk-through of the Pantheon. Moreno and his team wrapped up the camp by “broadcasting” from a local Frank Lloyd Wright house in St. Joseph, Michigan.

In addition to these virtual tours, the kids completed a variety of building and design projects. They worked on bridges from stick-type construction like straws and popsicle sticks. As a fun bonus they were asked to design structures that could safely carry an egg a distance of 20 feet.

“Renaissance Kids' projects generally attempt to instill empathy for, and an understanding of, how people relate with one another and with buildings and places. With social distancing and sheltering in our homes, we have been intentionally very flexible with expectations. This is about enrichment, not rigor—creativity, not pressure. Some families are more burdened by the pandemic than others and so we wish not to add any kind of stress to households,” says Moreno.

Collaboratively, the kids also designed lemonade stands with logos and menus. As part of this process they discussed various accessories that they could sell along with their lemonade

including T-shirts, bumper stickers and even a bucket of golf balls for a lemonade stand located near a golf course. One of their design versions derived from the logo, Mr. Tart, envisioned the face of the lemonade stand as a giant lemon with a large straw coming out of the top. Javier Britton, a recent Andrews architecture graduate, worked to interpret Moreno and the kids' drawings into computer-aided design (CAD) drawings—detailed 2D and 3D illustrations. While the kids were not able to build the stands together due to COVID-19, Moreno is planning to build at least one stand after the camp is finished.

“This program is a God-send for our family. Thank you,” said Jay Aitken, father of Axel Aitken, a Renaissance Kid participant from Montana. “I know Axel will look back on it as a highlight for sure. I can see you are already ‘planting seeds’ and expanding his interests—in that he often runs to find me and excitedly explain something you or the guest lecturers are discussing in the class.”

Renaissance Kids began in 2007, with a goal of “building with kids to build kids up.” It aspires to make complex ideas accessible to young minds by providing tools to better understand people’s relationships with each other and the physical world. In the past, Renaissance Kids participants have built many community-based designs and projects like sitting spaces, stage sets, playhouses and more.

Moreno and his team plan to keep this program going in some capacity all year long. If possible, next summer they will also have face-to-face sessions.

“The camp, in person and online, has been a blessing, and I believe I could not be doing anything better at this time in my life,” says Moreno. “I know we haven’t solved the world’s problems, but if we teach our kids that they can make a positive difference in the world then they will be better equipped to move forward in confidence.”

For additional photos and details about the activities visit andrews.edu/renkids and facebook.com/renaissancekids.architecture.