

Advanced: Students work with the latest computer programs and 3D printing technology.

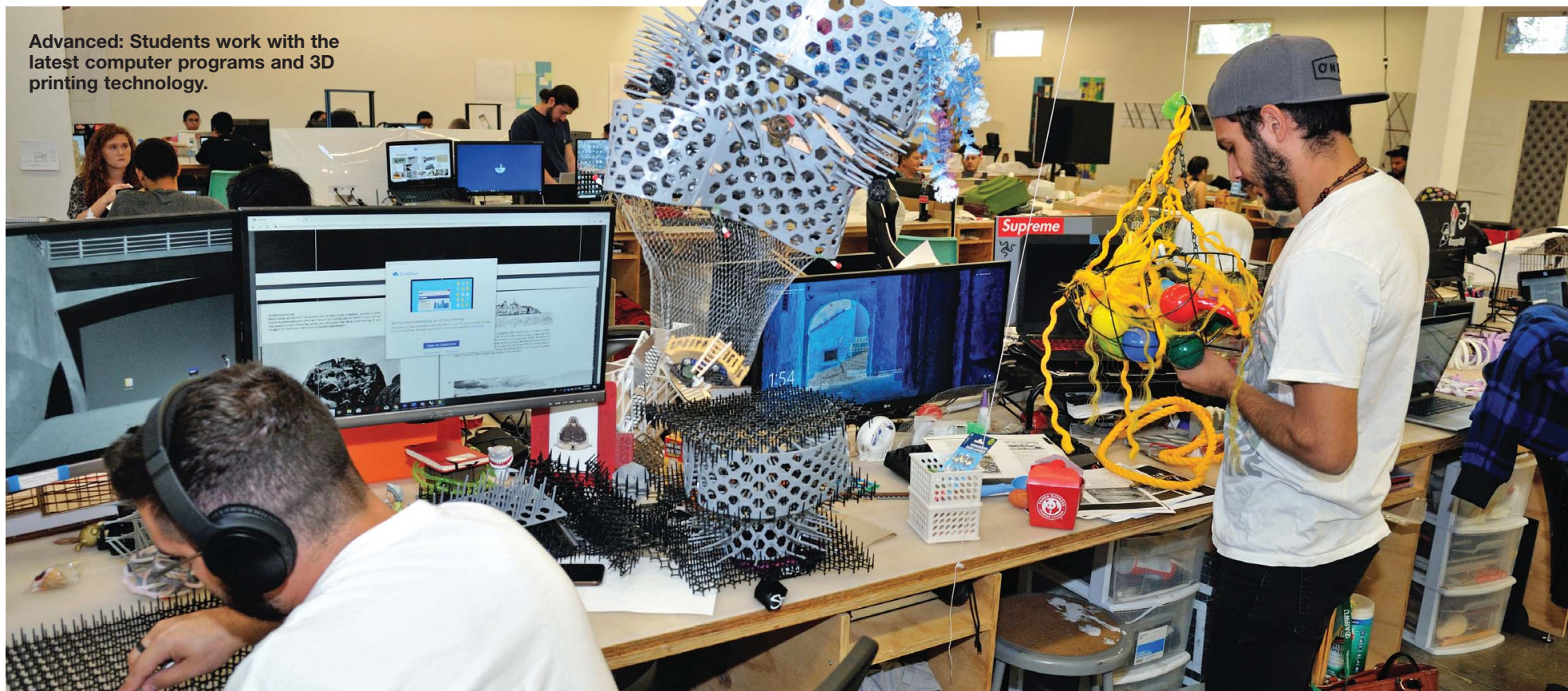


PHOTO BY THOMAS WASPER

Blueprint for Success

SCHOOLS: Woodbury University gives students access to a historically elite profession.

By **MICHAEL AUSHENKER** Staff Reporter

A small program that infuses students with real-world experience before they receive their diplomas — that is the hallmark of Woodbury University's School of Architecture, according to faculty and alumni.

Principally based in Burbank, the School of Architecture, with satellite sites in Hollywood and San Diego, has 400 students who study architecture, interior design and real estate development each year.

According to DesignIntelligence, which conducts annual rankings of all the U.S.-based public and private architecture schools, Woodbury has two nationally ranked architecture programs: Interior architecture was ranked 12th nationwide in 2018 while architecture ranked 18th.

"I want to make sure that our students excel to lead in this world of economic and technological change," Dean **Ingalill Wahlroos-Ritter** told the Business Journal. "The intimacy of the campus is a very significant strength of our school. The students work very closely one-on-one to working with our faculty members, most of whom are entrepreneurial. It's pretty astonishing, having taught at so many universities, to witness their commitment to teaching."

The scrappy school has been aggressive in keeping its curriculum current. Among the newest programs at Woodbury's architecture department: Computer Science/Design Computation, a four-year degree in collaboration with Woodbury's Schools of Business, Media Culture and Design (Applied Computer Science), and Liberal Arts; Urban Studies; and Design Construction Management.

New visions

At Woodbury's architecture program, 70 percent of students identify as a minority, largely from low-income Latino homes.

"We take exceptional pride in the upward mobility of our students and then use education to leverage incredibly creative and fulfilling careers," Wahlroos-Ritter said.

"A lot of them are first-generation college kids," **Jeanine Centuori**, director of the

school's program to provide real-world experience for students. "The underserved aspect is really important. We try to bring architecture to people who don't have access to the field."

"There's very few women in the profession," added **Desiree Gemignani**, executive director of **American Institute of Architects'** San Fernando Valley Chapter, which is based in Sherman Oaks and assists in getting graduates of Woodbury's architecture department licensed. "Half of the people coming through the architecture school are women. In our chapter, only 20 percent are women. So, to have a woman leader is amazing."

Last year, the school awarded nearly 80 student scholarships, supported by generous gifts by **Nick Roberts** and **Nielsen Travel Scholarships**, **AIA SFV Scholarships**, **Ignacio Rodriguez Scholarships** and **Ward-Lombardo Scholarships**.

Ignacio Rodriguez, founder of his own firm, is one Woodbury alumni who gives back to his alma mater, awarding \$2,000 grants to students for five years.

Sonny Ward graduated in 2002 and then taught at the school for a few years afterwards as he established his studio, **June Street Architecture** in West Hollywood. With husband **Michael Lombardo**, he established the **Ward-Lombardo Scholarship** at the school, earmarked toward Woodbury's Agency for Civic Engagement, or ACE initiative, which he co-founded with Centuori, his former faculty advisor.

Real-world experience

Centuori serves as director of ACE, which deploys Woodbury's architecture students into the real world to help address problems.

This spring, Woodbury students designed a courtyard for **National Health Foundation**, a recuperative care facility for homeless in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Pico-Union.

Past real-world assignments have included an outdoor classroom space at **John Muir Middle School** in Burbank, which was a 15-week design/build; a project in **Watts**; the **Bowtie Project**, a series of inhabitable art installations that are still up along the Los Angeles River in **Frogtown**; and **Shadow Hills Riding Club** in **Sun Valley**, where Woodbury students designed and built cabins for people with PTSD and children with disabilities. For the latter project, Home Depot donated ready-build sheds, which students deconstructed into cabins.

"What was unique was that they served war veterans with therapeutic equestrianism," Centuori said. "We made these cabins in support of this program. They were used for retreats."

In all, some 800 students have built 12 projects to serve 30 communities.

ACE co-founder **Ward** explained why he and Centuori sought to establish the initiative, which stemmed from a graduation project he worked on with her.

"Sometimes, our profession seems to look to the heroic, larger-scale projects," Ward said. "Architecture can be seen as an elite, unaffordable need. So, it's important for us to find local organizations. We live in a large city that has a lot of people right here in our community where our students can give back locally and make a huge impact."

Wahlroos-Ritter said of ACE's blending of in-class education with real-life situations, "it's now become a university mission that came out of the architecture department."

In fact, the initiative was originally named "Architecture for Civic Engagement."

ACE projects are made on shoestring budgets, to the tune of \$15,000 to \$20,000 apiece.

"The students' labor that's involved is part of our donation to (the clients)," Centuori said.

Social responsibility

"We have an amazing team here," said Woodbury Architecture Chair **Heather Flood**. "Ingalill has been very steadfast in her belief that our students are the future of architecture."

"My goal is to educate our students in a way they have a pretty sophisticated technical expertise," she said. "They couple that expertise with a sincere interest with leveraging design toward pressing problems in our world — housing crisis, environment crisis."

"This year in 2019, we're tackling the year in housing that's our overarching responsibility," Flood said of the mandate, which came from **Wahlroos-Ritter**.

Students are looking at new housing models to address the homeless crisis.

"We're taking them to construction sites so they can experience a building under construction," Flood said. "We're trying to be as immediate and hands-on with them as we can."

Woodbury legacy

Woodbury continues to produce architects who give back to their alma mater.

Marc Rapisardi, founder of **Sun Valley-based S3 Builders**, graduated from Woodbury's architecture program just over a decade ago. At the time he attended, **Lou Naidorf**, who had served as dean of Woodbury's School of Architecture and Design from 1990 to 2000, was the campus architect.



Cabins: ACE project in Sun Valley.

At Woodbury, Rapisardi found a mentor figure in **Naidorf**, who for 40 years worked at **Welton Becket & Associates** and, at 24, had designed the iconic **Capitol Records** building in Hollywood. The friendship led to 40 contracts for **S3 Builders** at Woodbury including a student center, rebuilt basketball court and the delicate move of four massive 90-year-old columns, one of which weighed 19,000 lbs.

"Not only did we know the (college), we knew high-level people at the university," Rapisardi said in a 2018 Business Journal article. "Those relationships were helpful."

Rapisardi, who has since partnered with fellow Woodbury alumnus **John Epperly** at **S3**, went on to hire many alumni.

Gemignani at the **American Institute of Architects** explained that "architecture is not a linear path anymore." She said that in addition to traditional architecture, students have been parlaying their skills into other professions that employ architectural components, such as graphic design, gaming and virtual reality. "It's really all the same kind of skill set."

While there are architecture programs at **College at the Canyons** in **Santa Clarita** and **Pierce College** locally, they are two-year programs, whereas Woodbury's architecture school remains the Valley's only five-year accredited professional degree program.

"That is the only game in town," Gemignani said. "They are making the most of that. They don't see themselves as local, nor should they."