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Contact: Jay Thompson

805-756-5186; jthomp04@calpoly.edu

Cal Poly Landscape Architecture Students Receive National Award for South Africa Orphanage Project

SAN LUIS OBISPO — A team of Cal Poly landscape architecture students has received a national award of excellence for a playground they designed and built at a South African orphanage.

The 5,000-square-foot project was honored in the community service category of the 2014 American Society of Landscape Architects Student Awards competition. It was one of only three awards of excellence given out in the annual competition that attracted more than 500 entries from 77 universities across the nation.

"The Ratang Bana Orphanage Park project has absolutely changed the face of the surrounding community," said David J. Watts, interim chair of the Cal Poly's Landscape Architecture Department, who organized the project and traveled to South Africa with the students. "Our landscape architecture program prepares students to plan, design and manage landscapes that maintain the health of the environment but are essential to the well-being of any healthy society."

Dean Christine Theodoropoulos, who heads the College of Architecture and Environmental Design, agreed.

"We are so proud of our students and faculty," she said. "They've made a difference in the lives of these children, and have improved the community in which they live. This is Learn by Doing at its very best."

The students started with a trash-strewn dirt lot beneath power lines in a community ravaged by poverty and HIV, and transformed it into a refuge — a place to "escape to the simple, carefree mindset that exists when every kid can be a kid and play," Watts added.

The awards will be presented at ASLA's annual meeting in Denver on Nov. 24.

"In a year where the jury loved everything that was awarded in this category, this undergraduate team's project stood out," says an article in this month's edition of Landscape Architecture Magazine. "The play space, designed and built for the 350 children in the Ratang Bana orphanage in Alexandria Township, South Africa, is also an open space resource for the whole community."

"Jurors applauded the reuse of materials and range of activities, as well as the 'really creative' use of resources under challenging constraints," the article added. "Many ... comments reflected their appreciation for the level of engagement and commitment from the community, but they also admired the project's 'graphics and energy and attitude.' "

The team included students Michael Aguas, Alex Clark, Andrew Elias, Alex Henige, Ryan Higginbotham, Alix Kidwell, Joanne Mark, Amanda McCaulley, Erica Monson, Rachel SantaOlalla, Nick Tuttle, Tony Webster, Ryan Higginbotham and Julianna

Wild.

Students broke into groups in the spring 2013 quarter and researched child development needs for three age categories —1- to 3-year-olds, ages 4-7 and youngsters 7 to 15 — who live at the Ratang Bana, a non-profit organization, whose name means “Love the Children.”

When the students arrived in South Africa in early September of 2013, they finalized the design addressing the local climate (dry with a month of heavy rains), native drought-tolerant flora, community demographics and the cultural history of the greater Johannesburg area.

Construction took about a week. The finished site established the only green space in the township and brought a renewed sense of joy to the lives of the local children, one of the students said.

“We only had eight days to get the whole playground up and into a finished product,” said Henige. “This included grading the site, installing the site elements, and planting and establishing those plants. We did that all with 13 students, who had little to no real world construction knowledge, a professor, and some awesome community members who worked beside us everyday throughout the process.”

The primary goal of the project was to encourage “healthy childhood development and give the kids the opportunity to experience the simple joys of a playscape customized for their community,” Watts said. “The goals for my students were to engage in project delivery, develop a sense of civic responsibility, and enhance their confidence through project design and construction.”

Moreover, his students learned another equally important lesson.

“At each day’s end, our team saw the joy we had brought to this community with each element we implemented,” Watts said. “By the end of the project, we knew we had created something special these children will never forget.”

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