

Educating the next generation of architects

WITH MUCH FOCUS being placed on the future of the lumber industry as a whole and how the next generation will keep the ship moving, let's not lose sight of peripheral markets that could be affected: groups like construction workers, designers, specifiers and architects.

For architects, as with most professions, learning is a lifelong process. As products change and go through new iterations, it's important to keep this key audience in the informational loop. But what happens when the product in question is wood, an entity that doesn't offer new and improved versions annually? How to keep the wood information flowing in an exciting and educational way?

Opportunities abound for established architects:

- An annual competition by the North American Deck & Railing Association recognizes the best of the best in deck design, separated by building material categories;

- Composite decking firms offer continuing education credit courses to promote the specification of their products over wood in multiple building situations; and

- On the wood side, a few years back the Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association launched a continuing education class, "Eastern White Pine: Sustainable Versatility," focusing on eastern white pine's contribution to sustainability, including grading rules, products and applications. This class is largely recognized as one of the few wood-specific sessions available to architects.

But once again, where is the wood education information for burgeoning architects not yet in the workforce?

On average, over their time in architecture school, a student will take classes in various maths (geometry, algebra, trig, calculus), science (physics, engineering), statistics, computer science (think: programming and modeling), and perhaps a little bit of art history. When it comes to products, the traditional focus has been to look toward the modern: steel, concrete, glass, and the like. A little ad hoc research indicates a vacuum of information when it comes to teaching students about the original building material, the greenest option available: wood.

Following years of participating in various architectural trade shows and walking show floors checking out the new products and updated offerings, a glaring omission became crystal clear: among the many "how-to" and informational sessions offered, not one—*not ONE*—focused on the use of wood. So, after a brainstorming session with the association's marketing committee on how best to reach not-yet-graduated architects, the idea for the first ever Sustainable Versatility Design Awards for architecture and design students was launched.

Now in its eighth year, the awards program is fee-free, and available to architecture, engineering and design students currently enrolled in an accredited architecture program in North America. Challenges around which the design contest are built have ranged from a light commercial project set in an urban environment, to a contemporary single-family home, to a tall building, to last year's moon colony. The singular common denominator of each year's challenge: eastern white pine must be a featured component.

The goal of the program is simple: to engage young architects and challenge them to think differently about including wood in their designs, both for the award entry and in their future career path. With the combination of an activity designed to challenge and expose the creativity of the student, plus a stimulus encouraging each entrant to see and recognize the value of specifying wood as a contemporary, sustainable, beautiful building material, it's no wonder every single winner to date has gushed about the beauty and ease of use of wood, and how it will remain in their basket of tools in the future.

How can you help to educate this younger generation? Hand out brochures at trade shows. Create a website landing page specifically for students. Volunteer to speak at your local architecture school. Or better yet: mentor a young architecture student and share your wood knowledge with them. The future depends on it.



WINNER: Omkar Prabhu, a Mississippi State University student in 2017, won first place in that year's Sustainable Versatility Design Award competition with his rendering "Exploring Avenues in Mass Timber."