

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2005

## In A Former Gym, Chatham Design Students Court New Careers

By Patricia Lowry

Susan Parker was teaching a botany class at Chatham College last winter when she realized she was on the wrong side of the desk.

Outside of class, the former director of the Pittsburgh Garden Center, who runs a small landscape design and consulting business, had been attending critiques of work that students were producing in their landscape design courses.

"I was very impressed by what I saw," Parker said. "The work I was doing was not of the same caliber."

And when it came to planting on a slope, Parker admits, "I was not terribly knowledgeable. If retaining walls had to be built, I couldn't spec it out."

So at 62, Parker became the oldest student in Chatham's Master of Landscape Architecture program, hoping to put her design skills on a par with her strong knowledge of plants.

The program, launched last year under the guidance of landscape architect Lisa Kunst-Vavro, is the first in Western Pennsylvania, building on a Master of Arts in Landscape Studies program developed under Behula Shah in 1997. While the landscape studies program prepares students to design residential landscapes, its graduates are not eligible to become registered landscape architects. The American Society of Landscape Architects had encouraged the college to develop a professional degree program that would train students to work in landscape architecture firms.



Chatham's 25 landscape architecture students and eight landscape studies students work side by side in foundation classes, learning drafting, graphics, design principles and history and plant identification.

"But you get a lot more technical in the professional curriculum," Kunst-Vavro said, where courses in construction, sustainability, ecology and computer design also are required, along with field work, an internship and a thesis.

Kunst-Vavro, raised mostly in Mt. Lebanon, had a self-designed major at the University of Pittsburgh -- in architectural studies, environmental studies and history -- and worked her way through

school at the family's Kunst Bakery on Forbes Avenue. Reading Ian McHarg's "Design With Nature" in Sam Hays' environmental policy class convinced her to pursue a master's degree in landscape architecture, with an emphasis on historic preservation. She worked in New Zealand, Texas and New York before returning to Pittsburgh, where for a dozen years she worked for the city's engineering and construction department, overseeing the redesign of Market Square and several playgrounds before budget cuts eliminated her position in 2003.

Kunst-Vavro and all of her students have settled into new digs in the college's former gymnasium,

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now the Art and Design Center, thanks to a high-spirited, \$1.5 million conversion by Rothschild Doyno Architects and Mosites Construction Co., that plays on the building's past. The center, which opened last year and will be dedicated tomorrow, also houses painting, printmaking, ceramics and sculpture studios, as well as another new Chatham program in Interior Architecture, under architect and author John Marsden.

Beginning this term, the college offers bachelor, master and master of science degrees in interior architecture; the latter is for students who have a first degree

in interior design or architecture and wish to specialize in a specific building type, user group or design issue in depth.

What's the difference between an interior architect, interior designer and interior decorator?

"Unfortunately the terms are being used interchangeably, and there's a lot of confusion over what designers do," Marsden said. "I think some of what we see on TV confuses us, too. Many design shows lead people to think they only pick out furniture and pillows, and there's so much more."

That's why some professional degree programs now favor

"interior architecture" over "interior design," to communicate that much of what they teach is space planning and finishing, including lighting, materials, color and furniture selection and arrangement.

"They also have to be concerned with building codes and environmental systems," Marsden said. "They do much more than most people would ever imagine."

Contributing to the confusion is the fact that anyone can call themselves an interior designer or decorator in Pennsylvania, which is not one of the 24 states or jurisdictions that require education, experience, an exam

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and certification. A committee of Pennsylvania interior designers is drafting legislation to regulate the profession.

There are 24 students, from 20-something to 60-something, in both master's programs combined. As in the landscape architecture program, all master's degree courses are taught at night or on Saturdays to accommodate students' day jobs. Students in the bachelor's program are harder to quantify; the 10 freshman taking

the introductory course don't have to declare their majors until next year.

A Long Island native and Carnegie Mellon University architecture graduate, Marsden has practiced in New York, San Francisco and Cleveland, and taught at Auburn University and the University of Florida. Marsden also is the author of three books on design for dementia patients and assisted living.

The new bridge that crosses the

ex-basketball court overlooks the drafting studios where Marsden, Kunst-Vavro and their adjunct professors teach, as well as the college's painting and printmaking studios. The bridge not only links mezzanine-level classrooms at both ends of the building but also acts as a student lounge and gallery and critique space for student work.

The bridge's sides are glass and steel railings; there's transparency underfoot, too, in its sandwich of glass and plastic panels that allow views into the hallway below. At center court, the basketball floor's circle enclosing the college's name, like all the floor's painted court lines, has been preserved. The center court circle is visible through the transparent circle at the center of the bridge that passes natural light to the first-floor hall from the skylight directly above.

"A beautiful wood floor is a great asset for an art studio space," Doyno said, adding that its preservation reminds design students of the history of the building and encourages them to "play like a champion today."

In another subtle move, the top band of the gym's frosted glass window panes were replaced with clear glass, so that people on the bridge can see the treetops.

"To me," Doyno said, "there's a very Renaissance sensibility about having art and sports and the relationship to the natural environment outside the building brought together at a place for landscape architecture, interior architecture, painting and sculpture."