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Architecture professor David Gamble poses with a model his students created for a project designed to improve a vacant lot on Syracuse's West Side.

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Everyone can learn from
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—David Gamble

Improving a community through collaboration

After Ward Baking Company on Syracuse’s West Side was demolished four years ago, a barren lot was left behind. Now, thanks to the work of a group of students and School of Architecture professor David Gamble, the vacant lot may one day be reborn as an outdoor community center featuring an open-air pavilion. “This project had a lot of potential for every party involved—the students, the University, the local residents, and the city,” Gamble says. “It was too good an opportunity to pass up.”

The project began last fall as a volunteer effort for Gamble and 34 students. Sylvia Martinez-Daloia, SU’s director of community relations and a member of the Spanish Action League on the West Side, contacted Gamble and captured his interest in the project. “I was impressed and thrilled that we could get the School of Architecture to work with the community,” she says. “David and the students really came through.”

Initially, they met with West Side residents and nonprofit community organizations to gather ideas and develop site plans. Working in teams, the students created drawings and site models for five proposals that they shared with residents in November. Through a series of surveys, community meetings, and public comment periods, two models emerged as favorites. In March, students presented their work to officials from the city’s economic development office, who pledged \$180,000 for the center. “It’s in the city’s interest that the West Side community makes the final decisions on the site,” Gamble says. “A number of nonprofit groups have a stake in the neighborhood, so they’ll decide what kind of community programs they want there. That will influence the final design.”

Not long ago, Gamble would never have predicted that the project would evolve as it has. That was before a \$24,800 Vision Fund grant from the University allowed him and the students to stick with the project beyond the initial phase and continue working on it through the spring semester. The \$1 million Vision Fund is a new initiative that supports faculty efforts to pursue innovative ways of teaching. “The grant was absolutely critical to the project,” says Gamble, who co-wrote the proposal with Pam Heintz, director of SU’s Center for Public and Community Service. “Otherwise, the site might remain vacant indefinitely and the neighborhood would continue to deteriorate. The public plaza and community pavilion have the potential to act as a focus for the residents and a catalyst for development there.”

Gamble also used the grant to establish the Community Design Center (CDC) in the School of Architecture. With the West Side initiative serving as its pilot project, the CDC will assist with similar projects using an interdisciplinary approach that taps into the expertise of an advisory council composed of faculty members from across campus. The center has six potential projects lined up for the fall semester, including the possible expansion of an arts

center and the design of a new building for a local school.

For students, the project was a learning experience from day one. They collaborated among themselves and with different groups, worked within budget guidelines, and learned about the interaction between government and its constituents. "It was good to work for the real world," says architecture student Maria Agostini G'99. "The tight budget was a challenge."

That's exactly what Gamble wanted students to learn. "They realized the real world has constraints—they had to think about what they could build with the money available," he says. "Architects must be informed about other disciplines that have an impact on their profession. Economics and politics play into design. The more students are aware of that, the more empowered they will be."

Gamble, who joined the School of Architecture in September 1997, wants the CDC to embrace teamwork and hopes its workshops will eventually include students from such fields as law, public policy, and geography. First-year architecture student Nick Saponara credits Gamble with easing his transition into the discipline. "He goes out of his way to make sure you're getting the most out of the experience," Saponara says.

And that shouldn't be a surprise, since Gamble places great value on educational experiences. "It's important to look outside your area of study," he says. "Everyone can learn from each other."

—KIMBERLY BURGESS AND JAY COX

Understanding information needs on the web

When Carol Hert G'95 was systems librarian at the University of Delaware in the late eighties, she was in charge of implementing library automation software packages intended to improve patrons' access to materials. "I was very interested in how people used the software," she says, "because as I walked around and watched them, it didn't seem they were getting what they needed."

Hert's desire to help these patrons became a burning need to understand how and why people seek and use information. Her quest has twice led to SU's School of Information Studies—first as a doctoral student in information transfer, and now as a professor with research interests in the interaction of users, systems, and the organizations that provide and support those systems. Although the scope of her research has expanded, its basic focus is unchanged. "It intrigues me that I've remained so interested in the topic that made me decide to get a Ph.D. in the first place," she says.

What interests Hert now is how people use the World Wide Web, and how to design web sites that facilitate information seeking. "People have a number of strategies they can pursue to get information," she says. "I'm interested in what brings people to web sites, and how they use those sites to satisfy their information needs."

Driving Hert's research is her work with a number of organizations that want to make their web sites more user friendly. She and colleague Charles R. McClure last year evaluated U.S. Department of Education sites to improve access. And Hert is in the third year of a long-term project to improve U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics web sites. "Organizations started off just putting up a bunch of content," she says. "I've seen a shift toward improving people's ability to find information. Organizations definitely recognize there's a lot more to using a web site than making it look attractive. Four years ago nobody was asking me to help them understand how people were using the web site, let alone how they could do a better job of managing the site to meet users' needs. Now, that's what organizations are interested in."

Hert's suggestions range from restructuring the web sites to mak-



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School of Information Studies professor Carol Hert G'95 wants to learn how and why people seek information on the World Wide Web.

ing changes in the organizations. Most are not prepared, for example, for the flood of comments that come from feedback buttons on their sites, she says. "That's the first inkling organizations have that maintaining web sites will mean some resource redistribution."

Some are in for bigger changes. Hert notes that the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which has always considered itself a statistics producer, is putting more of its resources into disseminating statistics on its web sites. "That's a shifting mission for the bureau," she says. "Right now I'm trying to understand the kinds of changes these technologies are causing, and how we can better prepare organizations for these changes and make sure user needs are met."

Hert brings what she learns in her research into the classroom. She teaches a course on information services and resources for the master of library science program, introducing students to ways reference librarians and other intermediaries help people find information. She also teaches a research methods class that allows students to become involved in her work. "Carol is a very strong research methodologist," says Kristin Eschenfelder, a doctoral student who worked with Hert on the education department project. "I have learned a lot from her about how to design quality research. She is very professional and deeply committed to her work. She has a sharp mind and an impressive breadth of interests and knowledge."

Hert says a hallmark of her teaching is using a range of strategies to reach students. "I do distance education and classroom teaching. I've done intensive courses, workshops, and continuing education. I take the content that engages me and then find ways to package and deliver it to different audiences."

—GARY PALLASSINO