Exploring the Built Environment Online

Craig Roland

The built environment offers rich opportunities for learning about our past and challenges for the future. This month's column features a number of online tools and resources for using the built environment as a starting point for art and design lessons in your classroom.

Online Design Tools

Google SketchUp (**sketchup.google.com**) is free downloadable software that can give middle- and high-school students the ability to design virtual three-dimensional models of anything they wish. Using Google SketchUp and Google Earth (**earth.google.com**), students can create maps of their school or community and then design new buildings, playground equipment, or other structures. With Architect Studio 3D (**www.architectstudio3d.org**), created by the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust, middle-school students are challenged to design a house with a specific client and location in mind. They can also learn more about architecture and Frank Lloyd Wright's life and work.

Curriculum Resources

Engaging Places (**www.engaging-places.org.uk**) is a fabulous resource for teachers and students interested in learning about buildings and places around them, both new and old. Although intended to support the study of the built environment in UK secondary schools, teachers elsewhere will find inspiration in the numerous curriculum projects, case studies, and resources featured on the site. Also worth checking out is the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's Educator Resource Center (**www.educatorresourcecenter.org**), which has a number of lesson plans that focus on the built environment including "Put Your Best Façade Forward" and "Imaginary Spaces: Designing a Play Space."

Architectural Resources

Perhaps the most comprehensive reference site for world architecture on the Web is GreatBuildings (**www.greatbuildings.com**), which documents some 1200 buildings and architects from around the globe and across history. The site includes a wealth of information in the form of photographic images, architectural drawings, maps, three-dimensional building models, commentaries, Web links, and more. Another site with interesting historical information and images is the Library of Congress's Built in America (**tinyurl.com/ykh3awl**), which contains architectural drawings, photographs, written histories, and lesson ideas for more than 35,000 historic structures and sites in the United States dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries.

For images of unusual homes and buildings visit You Live Where? (**www.youlivewhere.com**), a site dedicated to "collecting images of weird houses in order to marvel at their oddness and celebrate their ingenuity." The Bubble Dream Castle and the Upside Down House are certain to inspire your students to think up their own creative ideas for homes. Also, don't miss the WebUrbanist's illustrated listing of 10 Precarious Modern Buildings from around the world (**tinyurl.com/nptywh**).

Lastly, students can view many excellent examples of architecture from the recent Design It: Shelter Competition (**tinyurl.com/msys85**), sponsored by the Guggenheim Museum and Google SketchUp. The competition challenged designers to submit a virtual three-dimensional shelter for any location in the world using Google SketchUp and Google Earth. Following the lead of Frank Lloyd Wright, who required potential apprentices to design and build a shelter in the Arizona desert that they then had to live and study in, contestants used Google SketchUp to design a small structure where someone might sleep and work. The shelters had to be created for specific sites geo-located with Google Earth. The winning designs offer a great opportunity to discuss Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas about the relationship between architecture and place. ✎

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