

How a Local Developer is Giving Williamsburg Students Real World Experience

By Amy Zimmer | March 15, 2016 3:35pm

WILLIAMSBURG — With so much construction in the neighborhood, Gill Cornell, principal of the **Williamsburg High School for Architecture and Design**, had a simple goal: He wanted his students to go on site visits where they could shadow professionals in the field.

He's accomplished that goal and then some, as his students are now participating in a competition to design the temporary model sales office for a local developer: the massive — and controversial — 8-story "technology and maker hub" taking up a full block at 25 Kent Ave.

"This is not theoretical. There are deadlines and rules," said Cornell, who in 2009 became principal of the 600-student school that educates what he refers to as students caught in the achievement gap — 80 percent are black or Latino boys; 25 percent are students with special needs. "When the kids are given a real job and have to meet a deadline, they take it more seriously than a class project."

More than a year ago, Cornell was introduced to Williamsburg developer Toby Moskovits, founder of Heritage Equity Partners, who quickly became a willing collaborator. She dreamed up a lecture series for the students and enlisted her architects, engineers and urban planners to make personal visits to the school to discuss their projects.

She connected the students with mentors from Gensler, the renowned architecture and design firm working on her tech hub, who will meet weekly with the students until their designs are due in May.

"This is exposing them to career opportunities and then letting them leave with a portfolio," said Moskovits, who said her real-world education motivated her to help expose young people to the job market.

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“When I think about what I learned in college versus what I learned from the people I had an opportunity to learn with — my mentors and real life experience — this to me is a model for the city,” Moskovits added. “It’s transformational. It’s taking kids and having them leave school with real skills.”

Moskovits is hopeful to start building out the model space in the temporary sales office at the 150-room Williamsburg Hotel she’s building next door.

Despite being dealt a recent blow, when the tech hub’s rezoning was voted down by the local community board — whose vote is advisory — she’s already talking with the high school about next year’s contest for the kids to design an actual office in the building itself, which she expects would take 18-months to construct.

Moskovits is nothing if not enthusiastic about job creation.

Besides the 480,000-square-foot tech hub — which many real estate experts believe would be a game-changer for Brooklyn’s office scene — she’s also planning to build the “Bushwick Generator” with 75,000 square feet of light industrial and office space on Moore Street.

She’s also behind the Brooklyn Bread Lab, a Bushwick bakery and mill run by the well-regarded chef Adam Leonti who will soon take over as head chef for Moskovits’ hotel. She recently began talks with a local charter school to work with them on cooking classes, she mentioned.

“It’s all about the future of the city,” Moskovits said. “No housing is affordable without jobs. [And] this is taking kids from all over the city and building an educated workforce.”

The school has hosted competitions for the students to design and build its office spaces at its home, which shares space with other schools at the Van Ardsdale campus on North Sixth Street. But this partnership takes the concept further.

“The classroom is really a controlled environment The kids feel safe, as they should, but the real world is not like that,” Cornell said. “The thing that we’ve been lacking in is giving the kids the actual experience to fail — fail in a good way and learn how to adapt to those failures and make mistakes in a real world situation. Life is not perfect, and the only way to learn that is in the real world.”

Romeo Brambilla, 18, a senior who commutes from Staten Island by ferry and bike and is filming the lectures for the school, said the exposure he’s gotten there has inspired him to become a furniture designer.

“You go from sketching on a piece of paper, then you go to AutoCAD, doing 3-D designs,” he said of the coursework he’s done. “It’s like a little crumb of what’s out there in the real world.”

But working with a developer is a bigger deal, students said.

Kyle Lewis, 18, a senior from Mill Basin, who wants to do civil engineering, noted, “I have friends in college who aren’t even doing things like this.”