

STUDENTS LIVING **CARDINAL, GOLD AND GREEN**

Art and creativity are universal languages that have the ability to connect communities and inspire change. The intersection of creativity and sustainability is deeply rooted in opportunities that call for change, innovation and appreciation for nature and bringing people together.

“Through its ability to capture the human experience and provoke emotional responses, art can catalyze reflection and engagement, helping individuals navigate complex issues and find new perspectives,” as explained by Sustainable Earth.

This month we celebrate the collaborative intersection of art and sustainability by highlighting the work of seven graduate students within the College of Design at Iowa State University.

These students demonstrate the connection between sustainability and design through mediums including architecture, ceramics, painting and sculpture. Through their creative visions, these students have produced projects and art pieces that encourage deeper consideration of sustainability in everyday life and a sustainable future.

Layers of Sustainability

Marzieh Janbazi is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Architecture degree. During the spring 2025 semester, she demonstrated her innovative sustainable vision through participating in a Sustainable Building Design studio.



Photo Courtesy of Marzieh Janbazi

Her project, titled “Layers of Life”, “explores how architecture can reconnect people with nature, food systems and community.” Her creative vision explores sustainable solutions that go beyond the environment.

Envisioned to be built near Grays Lake in Des Moines, Janbazi’s project creatively considers and integrates sustainability through each level of her building design. She includes community farming to connect people to the source of their food, community space and sustainable building materials — and effectively combines them into one cohesive space.



Image Courtesy of Marzieh Janbazi

Her design offers a creative solution to the disconnection

of urban life and nature by creating an opportunity for open participation in the environment and community.

“The idea came from thinking about how cities often disconnect people from the sources of their food, natural cycles and each other. I wanted to design a place where growing food, learning, living and community life happen together, creating a more resilient and socially connected urban environment,” Janbazi explained

Because there is often a disconnect between people and nature, Janbazi encourages sustainability to be present in daily life. Her design encourages visible sustainability including urban agriculture and more direct community-involvement in food production and food systems planning, “making sustainability something people experience every day, not something hidden behind technology.”

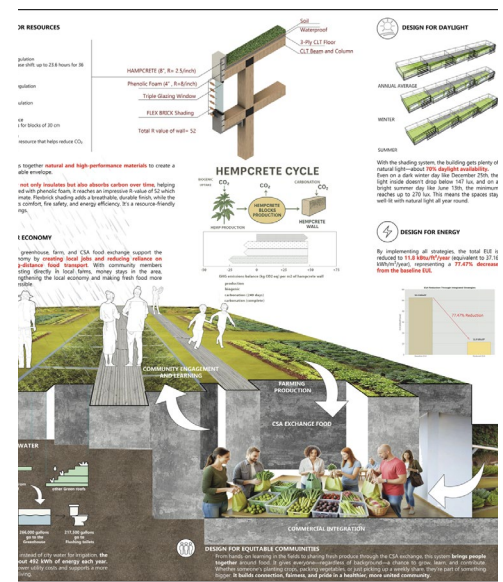


Image Courtesy of Marzieh Janbazi

Janbazi envisions a future of architecture that is mindful of material use and supports sustainability through connection to natural environments and community. Her use of urban farming, ecofriendly design choices and community involvement demonstrates how both environmental and social sustainability can be intertwined with architectural design.

Her work on “Layers of Life” allows people to look at sustainability from her creative perspective, empowering them to consider more ways to integrate sustainability in our lives.

She said, “Creativity is important for sustainability because solving environmental problems requires new ways of thinking about design, materials and how people use spaces.” Janbazi’s project demonstrates how thoughtful architectural design can integrate creative sustainable elements to serve many purposes and solve multiple problems.

Social Sustainability Through Community Resilience

Timothy Ochola is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Architecture degree. Through an array of mediums such as painting, sculpture and digital media, Ochola narrates a story of identity, memory and community sustainability and its resilience across history. His art looks into the deep support of community through challenging times of healing and change.



Photo Courtesy of Timothy Ocholavv

“My inspiration often comes from observing how histories, especially colonial histories, are embedded in landscapes and built environments. I translate these invisible forces into visual and spatial expressions through layered paintings, material explorations and interactive installations,” Ochola explained in exploring his process.

These artistic expressions capture the experience of many people in East Africa, including Kenya where Ochola is from. In focusing on community and culture, Ochola’s work centers around social sustainability. He said, “Sustainability, to me, extends beyond ecological performance to include cultural continuity and social equity.”

His work demonstrates the connection between community and environment through exploring how the land is tied to culture, experience and memory for communities like the ones in East Africa.

By narrating the story of resilience in East Africa, he brings attention to the importance of social sustainability and the strength of community connection.

He expressed, “I also see my work as part of a broader dialogue. It is not only about individual expression but about contributing to collective conversations around culture, sustainability and the future of design.”

He added, “As an architecture student, I am especially interested in how these artistic explorations can inform the creation of more responsive, inclusive and sustainable built environments.”



Image Courtesy of Timothy Ochola

Creativity has always had the ability to influence change through story telling as portrayed in Ochola’s pieces. In looking ahead, he said, “I imagine a future where creative practices actively repair relationships: between humans and nature, past and present and marginalized communities and systems of power. In this sense, sustainability

becomes both a technical and poetic act.”

Ochola’s work demonstrates the profound ability of art being able to creatively share a meaningful story or experience that encourages the audience to consider a new perspective or inspire change, healing and connection between communities.



Image Courtesy of Timothy Ochola

Empowering Community, Artists and Eco-Conscious Design

Sabrina Kerr is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Architecture degree. Kerr is currently in the Sustainable Building Design studio, focused on creating an architectural design that incorporates sustainability.

Kerr’s design project is set in Duluth Minnesota, utilizing the downtown area in the city for a multipurpose space that supports community, the environment and local creatives and businesses.



Photo Courtesy of Sabrina Kerr

Kerr’s design stemmed from her question of, “How can I design something which could potentially give back to the land rather than taking from it?”

In designing for sustainability and strengthening community, she envisioned a space that has a positive impact on human connection as well as the environment. Her design is a large, layered community center with a gallery area, space for local businesses, and it incorporates systems that have lower environmental impact.

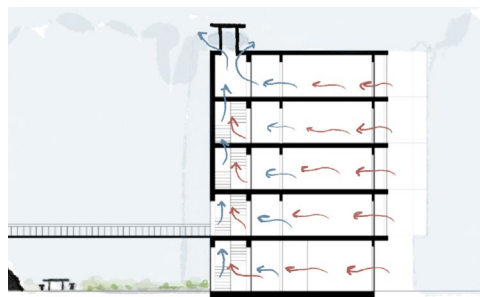


Image Courtesy of Sabrina Kerr

The concept that Kerr designed emphasizes the social aspect of sustainability, with priority on the importance of space for

community, artists and creativity to flourish.

Art adds vibrancy to cities, and in envisioning this multi-use space, she highlighted the social impact of artists while creating a community that also supports its environment. Her vision integrates art into the city in a manner that invites community engagement and sparks inspiration.

Art is a unique resource for communicating ideas and experiences that can motivate people to consider new perspectives. “Art is emotive and provocative. It can make you think about uncomfortable topics in a less call-out type of manner. It allows you to think critically about the environment,” Kerr Shared.

Her consideration of space fosters open communication about art and community by creatively centering them as a main component of her design.

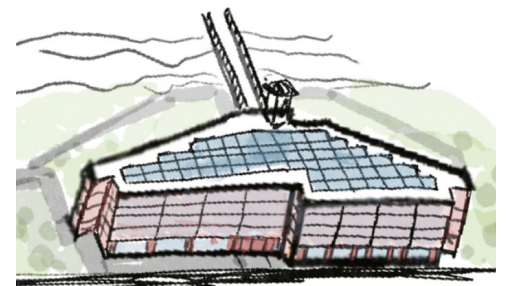


Image Courtesy of Sabrina Kerr

In considering the material cost of architecture and challenge of incorporating sustainability, Kerr said that it can be discouraging to feel like not enough work is being done for the environment.

Despite this, Kerr had an opportunity to intern for a company that valued sustainability and remodeled their building using 100 percent upcycled materials. This inspired her to keep pursuing sustainable architecture, “there are people out there doing groundbreaking work fighting for a more sustainable future and we have the power to join them,” she noted.

Finding Beauty in The Environment Around Us

Fahmida Nahar Rafa is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Integrated Visual Arts degree. She uses found material including rocks, wood and trash, as well as ceramics, print making and curated installations to create intricate pieces of art. Her art is inspired by her culture but also the experience of “human beings in a decaying world,” as she described it.



Photo Courtesy of Fahmida Nahar Rafa

Growing up in Bangladesh Rafa said that sustainability is a standard, with the use of available materials and upcycling as a part

of daily living. She explained that art and creativity are very integrated in her culture, including the practice of upcycling cloth into [Nakshi Kantha](#) — an intricate embroidered quilt or form of fabric art.

This also includes the common colorful paintings on buildings depicting flowers and other connections to the land around. Rafa said that although these Bangladesh community members are not traditionally trained in art, “Their sense of art came from the way they lived their lives, close to earth, close to rivers, close to green fields,” taking inspiration from nature that surrounds them.

Rafa’s background of being around art that utilized and upcycled available materials is expressed through her own work of reimagining discarded items and natural materials into pieces of art. Rafa said any time she is on a walk, she picks up things to create art or to hold on to.

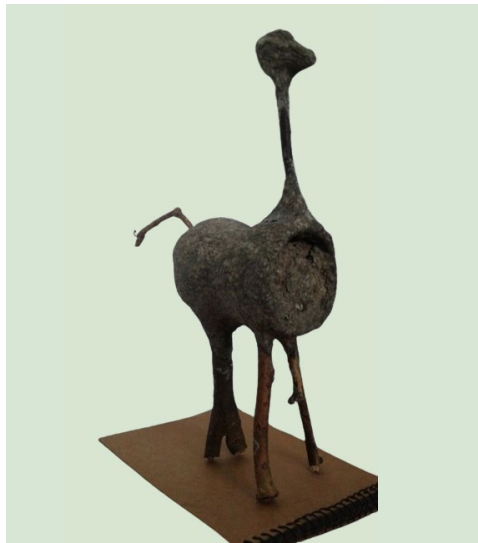


Photo Courtesy of Fahmida Nahar Rafa

In a more recent piece, Rafa used twigs and rocks she found outside, combined with ceramics to create a piece of art. An older piece of hers built from discarded plastic bottles and papier-mache, also demonstrates her ability to upcycle and reimagine materials.



Photo Courtesy of Fahmida Nahar Rafa

Through her art, Rafa asks viewers to consider that, “we already have so many materials in this world; if we take the ones that already exist and make something new, this practice can help us reduce financial costs and also reduce harmful environmental waste.” Many materials available to us can be transformed into art if we let creativity take over.

By upcycling materials, Rafa gives a new meaning and new life to objects that are often overlooked. Transforming trash and natural materials, and combining them with other mediums of art, allows her to convey a message through her resourcefulness. Her ability to create art out of the materials around her reflects

her sustainable efforts and gives viewers a new perspective on finding beauty in nature and upcycled material.

Cultivating Community and Crops

Timilehin Ogunsola is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Architecture degree. Similarly to Janbazi, he previously took part in the Sustainable Building Design studio in spring of 2025.

His project “Harvest Row,” creatively considers how to combine social and agricultural space that at its core, integrates sustainability. Like Janbazi’s building design, Ogunsola imagines this as a part of the green space around Gray’s Lake in Des Moines.



Photo Courtesy of Timilehin Ogunsola

The design focuses on utilizing vertical farming that saves space and would produce enough food annually to support over 100 people. Ogunsola’s design also incorporates energy and

technology systems that reduce the impact on the environment.

Combining this agricultural space with residential and community space, his design fosters social and environmental sustainability through social connection, communal food production and connection to nature.



Image Courtesy of Timilehin Ogunsola

Architecture is very human centered, providing space, amenities and benefits to people. Ogunsola’s project is intended to show that both sustainability and human focus can be achieved in architectural design through creative and innovative thinking.

He noted, “It communicates that architecture can move beyond minimizing environmental impact to actively supporting healthier living, community connection, and ecological awareness.”

Ogunsola expressed that architecture has an opportunity to further incorporate sustainability, going beyond reducing harm but finding creative ways to actively

give back to the environment as well as providing resources to people and communities.

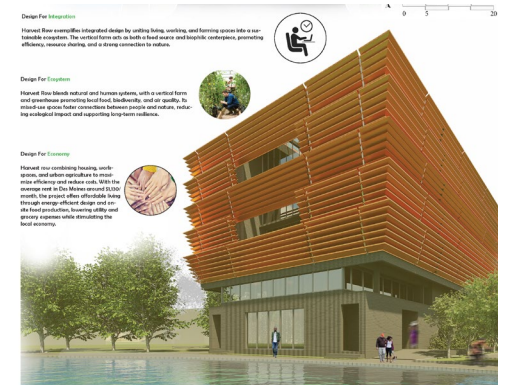


Image Courtesy of Timilehin Ogunsola

“Ultimately, Harvest Row represents my commitment to integrating sustainability not as an add-on, but as a core driver of design — shaping spaces that are efficient, meaningful, and impactful,” he said.

Looking to the future, Ogunsola sees creativity playing a significant role in changing how we approach problems and solutions. His building design is an example of the possible larger overlap of architecture and sustainability in the future.

Ogunsola described, “Harvest Row is more than a building; it’s an urban prototype for the future.” Projects like these have the ability to advocate for change as well as inspire others to consider how to incorporate sustainability creatively into their buildings, designs and everyday life.

Reflections in Nature

Yue (Delfina) Ma is a graduate student pursuing a Master of

Integrated Arts degree. Working primarily with oil paint and installation art, Ma incorporates natural materials including fabric, sand and clay in her art pieces to explore the relationship between environment, identity and contemporary society.

Her work reflects both her personal experiences as well as her appreciation of the natural world through the lens of nature to look into human connection and shared understanding.



Photo Courtesy of Delfina Ma

Community and identity are two of the themes in Ma's work. She aims to make art that, "can bring out the most connected thing among people."

In sharing her own stories, her art is designed to foster connection, open conversation and create a sense of community and belonging. "I want to give as much as I can back to the community and create plentiful art that can bring people together," she said.



Image Courtesy of Delfina Ma

Often telling her story of self-exploration through the lens of nature, Ma paints scenes of the environment that reflect her personal journey.

Her art uniquely shows the relationship between people and nature, demonstrating how she relates and connects with the natural environment in everyday life. This deep appreciation of nature and how it relates to the human experience encourages stewardship of the environment we are a part of.



Image Courtesy of Delfina Ma

Ma believes that art and sustainability are already integrated in daily life and is all around us. Her art highlights the potential for continued growth in creativity and sustainability in the future. She expressed, "It is very possible for us to achieve that," especially over time as recognition grows.

Reimagining Architecture

Aanchal Sunuwar is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Architecture degree, and currently in the Sustainable Building Design studio this semester.

Within her project, Sunuwar is reimagining an existing parking garage in Duluth Minnesota, through transforming it into a more sustainable, zero energy design that uses renewable energy and natural heating and cooling systems. In addition, she also sees opportunity for creating space for agriculture, community, living and work, making green space and sustainability part of every aspect of life.



Photo Courtesy of Aanchal Sunuwar

Her structure is designed to foster social and environmental

sustainability through its interconnected systems. The building fosters community through its shared living, work and green space. It also encourages connection through growing food for the community in a shared greenhouse.

While supporting social connection, the building also functions on sustainable systems including renewable solar energy, recycled heat from the greenhouse, sun roof and rainwater collection.

Sunuwar also includes a [double-skin facade](#) design, creating two outer layers to the building with a space between — providing better protection from the cold in the winter and improved ventilation in the summer. These systems and design choices help to create a completely self-sufficient zero-energy architectural design.

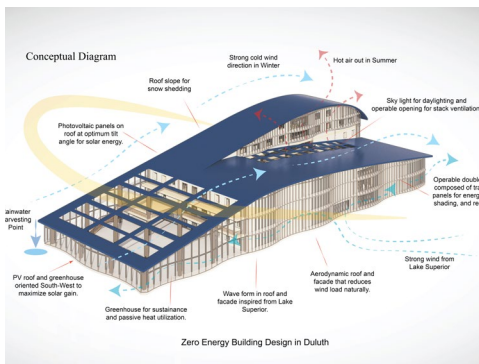


Image Courtesy of Aanchal Sunuwar

This project requires consideration and balance of many aspects. Sunuwar explained, “Sustainability in architecture is not just about technology, but also about rethinking how we design spaces.

An architectural design responds to climate, culture, and social context in unique ways. Therefore, creativity plays a huge role in sustainability in architecture.”

Alongside sustainability, Sunuwar also focused on making an aesthetically pleasing building design that emphasizes the creativity in her project. She expressed, “I think sustainability demands creativity, and anything creative is art.”

Sunuwar’s work demonstrates her ability to achieve aesthetics as well as functionality. Her roof creatively mimics the flowing waves of Lake Superior. It is also designed at an angle to absorb the most amount of sunlight to convert to energy in addition to reducing the wind load on the building. Inside the building she is designing beautiful spaces for the community, using locally sourced and building materials that are more eco-friendly.

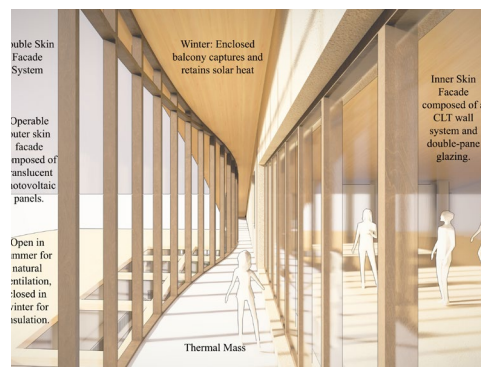


Image Courtesy of Aanchal Sunuwar

In the future, Sunuwar sees potential in the growth of sustainability in architecture through design strategies displayed in her work. By not only

reducing harm to the environment but examining how architecture and nature can coexist, Sunuwar illustrates the possibilities for future building designs to incorporate sustainable strategies including renewable energy and responsible material use.

Each of these students and their artistic expression and designs work to empower and inspire sustainability from a new perspective. Through multiple mediums, they share messages of community connection, personal experience, environment and innovation that provokes conversation about sustainability in today’s environment.

By combining art with eco-consciousness, and community, these seven students demonstrate the possibilities of sustainability as an interconnected practice.

The students highlighted this month are only a few of the many student creatives across campus. To connect more with some of the creatives at Iowa State University explore the different design program pages on the [Iowa State College of Design website](#).

To find more opportunities on campus to express your creativity, visit the [Iowa State University Student Innovation Center](#) for information about [makerspaces](#), [innovation programs](#) and [events](#).