I-STUDIO COLLABORATION WITH FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
by Gwen Breedlove and Roger Fisher

A group of students at the University of Pretoria's Department of Architecture and the Division of Information and Communication Technology (ICOMTEK) of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research collaborated with the Department of Architecture at the Florida International University in Miami to complete the requirements for the Freedom Park Design Competition. The collaboration was done across the Internet with interaction between students from Pretoria and those from Miami, Venezuela and Chile. Through bi-weekly video conferences the students and studio leaders communicated and exchanged ideas and were given opportunities to present their ideas and design concepts.

The day-to-day communication between the students was done through a web page that was created to house all research and ideas that the various students developed. One student from the University of Pretoria was teamed with an international student. Each of the five teams was responsible for a component of the competition requirements. Due to their local knowledge of the site, the cultures and the history of the country the South African students took the lead in the research that was required for the project. The international students concentrated on precedent studies and concept generation.

From the concept sketches, the South African students finalised the designs and placed the buildings and land designs on the drawings. These drawings were e-mailed to the international students in Miami and discussed during the pre-final video-conference. The Miami students rendered the designs with the advanced computer graphics and sent them back to South Africa. The South African students then compiled the final presentation on eight A1-size sheets and presented the submission to the Miami students in a final video conference. The design entry was submitted and evaluated with more than a 100 local and international entries.

Significance

Three international organisations collaborated in a virtual design exploration. For the first time in the history of the three institutions, there was collaboration on a single design resolution. A project was conceptualised where the participants could combine their creative ideas to produce a remarkable design for a complex brief while only ever meeting each other in virtual space. Without the speed of information transfer and the potential that the Internet offers for communication, the project would not have been completed in the record eight weeks.

Furthermore, the chat room, sharing capability of drawings and designs on the FTP site and e-mail options provided opportunity for the participants to access the information throughout a 24-hour day cycle in two time zones that are six hours apart. With a short overlap of only one hour of regular working time, the video conferences were held simultaneously - in the South African afternoon which was breakfast coffee time in Miami. Each group thus did most of their work while the other group was sleeping.

The completed work was then added to the FTP site ready for the next group to start working first thing every morning with a freshly updated set of drawings. This collaboration was groundbreaking work that takes the idea of the innovation generation to new heights and that establish a creative but firm connection between four world centres of learning in architecture. The University of Pretoria's Department of Architecture is truly proud to have been associated with such an innovative project. Although ours is a developing environment it is fertile ground for using the opportunities offered by cutting edge technology so as to meet the dictum of the University of Pretoria – "Locally relevant, internationally competitive." ❷

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