

STEEL DESIGN

2026 STUDENT COMPETITION



PROGRAM

2026 STEEL DESIGN STUDENT COMPETITION

26th Annual ACSA/AISC Student Competition

Category I **COMMUNITY DANCE CENTER**

Category II **OPEN**

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) is pleased to announce the 26th Annual Steel Design Student Competition for the 2025-2026 academic year. Administered by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) and sponsored by the American Institute of Steel Construction (AISC), the program is intended to challenge undergraduate and graduate students, working individually or in teams, to explore a variety of design issues related to the use of steel in design and construction. Steel must be used as the primary structural material and contain at least one space that requires a long-span steel structure, with special emphasis placed on innovation in steel design.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

The 2026 Steel Design Student Competition will offer architecture students the opportunity to compete in two separate categories:

Category I COMMUNITY DANCE CENTER

Design a Community Dance Center in an area of your choice. Students are invited to submit design proposals that address how this program can contribute to the community as a more integral part of the civic fabric.

Category II OPEN

Offers architecture students the opportunity to select a site and building program using steel as the primary material. This competition category permits any building type other than a Community Dance Center.

Students may not enter both categories of the competition.

The competition allows students to explore the many functional and aesthetic uses for steel as a building material and structural system. Steel is an ideal material for multi-story building because it offers the greatest strength-to-weight ratio. In addition, steel can be constructed quickly and for all project site types with the use of labor-saving prefabrication methods such as kit-of-parts, panelization, and modular construction. A building built with steel is potentially more flexible and adaptable to allow for a change in program, occupancy, and loading needs over time.

ELIGIBILITY

Because the support of AISC is largely derived from steel companies whose markets are mainly in the U.S., the ACSA/AISC Steel Design Student Competition is open to students and/or student teams from ACSA Full and Candidate Member Schools, as well as ACSA Affiliate Members Schools from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

All student entrants are required to work under the direction of a faculty sponsor. Entries will be accepted for individuals as well as teams. Teams must be limited to a maximum of five students. Submissions should be principally the product of work in a design studio or related class.

AWARDS

The design jury will meet in Summer 2026 to select winning projects and honorable mentions. Winners and their faculty sponsors will be notified of the competition results directly. A list of winning projects will be posted on the ACSA web site at www.acsa-arch.org and the AISC web site at www.aisc.org.

Winning students and their faculty sponsors will receive cash prizes totaling \$20,000 with distribution as follows:

Category I: Community Dance Center		Category II: OPEN	
First Prize		First Prize	
Student	\$4,000	Student	\$4,000
Faculty Sponsor	\$1,500	Faculty Sponsor	\$1,500
Second Prize		Second Prize	
Student	\$2,000	Student	\$2,000
Faculty Sponsor	\$1,000	Faculty Sponsor	\$1,000
Third Prize		Third Prize	
Student	\$1,000	Student	\$1,000
Faculty Sponsor	\$500	Faculty Sponsor	\$500

A limited number of honorable mentions may also be awarded at the jury's discretion. Prize-winning submissions will be exhibited at the 2027 ACSA Annual Meeting and the 2027 AIA National Convention as well as published in a competition summary publication.

CRITERIA FOR JUDGING

Criteria for the judging of submissions will include the following:

- Creative use of structural steel in the design solution
- Successful response of the design to its surrounding context
- Successful response to basic architectural concepts such as human activity needs, structural integrity, and coherence of architectural vocabulary.

Submissions must clearly represent the selected program. In addressing the specific issues of the design challenge, submissions must clearly demonstrate the design solution's response to the following requirements:

- An elegant expressive understanding of the material–structural steel–deployed with maximum innovative potential with a minimum of one long span space
- A strong conceptual strategy translated into a coherent integrated design proposal
- An articulate mastery of formal concepts and aesthetic values
- A compelling response to the physical and cultural context of the scheme
- A mature awareness of and an innovative approach to sustainability as a convergence of social, economic and environmental issues
- A thorough appreciation of human needs and social responsibilities

ADVANTAGES OF STEEL

Steel has a natural beauty that can be exposed to emphasize grace, slenderness and strength in space and form, as well as in building envelopes to enhance environmental performance and aesthetic character.

Resilience

Structural steel offers a number of benefits in building design including the capacity to bear great loads in tension and compression, high resiliency and performance under harsh and difficult conditions, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, and the ability to span great distances with minimal material. Steel can be shaped by many processes, ranging from standard rolled sections to custom castings and digitally generated components. It can be prefabricated and delivered for site assembly, and it can be erected quickly under almost any weather condition to meet tight construction schedules.

Efficiency

Steel offers the greatest strength-to-weight ratio of structural materials. In addition, steel can be constructed quickly and for all project site types with the use of labor-saving prefabrication methods such as kit-of-parts, panelization, and modular construction. A building built with steel is potentially more flexible and adaptable to allow for a change in program, occupancy, and loading needs over time. Steel, if desired by the architect, can be graceful, nimble, and minimal in its bulk both in plan and section, and it integrates easily with other systems and materials.

Sustainability

Using steel is a highly sustainable option. The production of raw US structural steel involves in upwards of 93% recycled content, keeping your old cars and appliances out of landfills. At the end of a building's life, 98% of all structural steel is recycled into new steel products, with no loss of its physical properties. As such, structural steel isn't just recycled but "multi-cycled," as it can be recycled over and over and over again. It is truly a circular cradle-to-cradle material, and few materials can claim that. [Steel Sustainability](#)

Expression

Exposed and curved steel is an art, providing endless possibilities for architectural expression. Curved steel enhances the visibility of any building project – from the largest monumental project to that building down your street. Curved steel is one way to increase the design creativity of your next building project. And most importantly, curved steel is readily available nationally from a number of qualified AISC Associate Member Bender-Rollers. AISC information on curved steel: aisc.org/curvedsteel.

For more information, see the [2026 Studio Guide](#).

Category I – COMMUNITY DANCE CENTER

A Community Dance Center is a place where creativity and culture take center stage. Reflecting the aspirations and spirit of its dancers, these buildings foster a richly diverse environment - both artistically and socially - using performance, education, and imagination to serve their communities through a uniquely expressive artform. As these cultural centers continue to evolve, the performers and audiences alike are encouraged to explore new ideas, new forms of expression, and to celebrate the human spirit.

Design responses to this prompt should imagine a building that not only houses performance, practice, and education, but also serves as an engaging public space - one that integrates seamlessly into the fabric of the community, invites public interaction, and becomes a dynamic cultural catalyst through creative exchange.

SITE

The site for the competition is the choice of the student and/or faculty sponsor. However, the site should be accessible by multiple modes of transportation such as public transportation, biking, or walking. Submissions will be required to explain the site selection, strategy, and access graphically or otherwise.

PROGRAM

The total area of the program may range depending on the community's needs. The Community Dance Center program area total should be a minimum of 30,000 square feet and should be compatible size with the needs of the population served. Your building square feet can grow in size, without limitation, to appropriately meet the needs of chosen community and site.

As ballet and dance studios throughout the country continue to adapt to better serve their communities and expand their reach, the center may include both "typical" dance programs as well as public gathering and community spaces - the extent to which is to be determined by your analysis of the civic needs, site, etc. You are encouraged to consider creative ways that the center may make their performances more accessible to the public, specifically to members of the community who may not otherwise be exposed to dance as an outlet for creative expression or personal growth.

The performance and rehearsal studios should be designed to accommodate multiple forms of dance and different types of performances. These spaces will support both practice and performance, and should be one of the distinctive features of the center. The following spaces are general guides; students and faculty can adjust and expand on the program spaces to fit the center and community needs.

Outdoor Public Space

Flexible & Multi-Functional Outdoor Space

Entry & Reception Area

Welcome Desk/Ticketing Counter	500 sq. ft.
Costume Display	500 sq. ft.
Lobby Seating Area	1,000 sq. ft.
Cafe	1,000 sq. ft.
Public Restrooms	600 sq. ft.
<i>Entry & Reception Area Subtotal</i>	<i>3,600 sq. ft.</i>

Performance & Rehearsal Studios

Large Studio	4,000 sq. ft.
Clear Span Space	
Minimum 20' Clear Height	
Seating for up to 150	
Optional: 40' tall fly tower adjacent to stage	
Two (2) Medium Studios	2,500 sq. ft. each
Clear Span Space	
Min. 16' Clear Height	
<i>Performance & Rehearsal Studios Subtotal</i>	<i>9,000 sq. ft.</i>

Dancer's Lounge Area

Two (2) Dressing Room/Locker Rooms	600 sq. ft. each
Two (2) Restrooms	300 sq. ft. each
<i>Dancer's Lounge Area Subtotal</i>	<i>1,800 sq. ft.</i>

Classrooms

Two (2) Flexible, Multi-Purpose Classrooms	1,000 sq. ft. each
<i>Classrooms Subtotal</i>	<i>2,000 sq. ft.</i>

Administration Suite

Six (6) Staff Offices	100 sq. ft. each
Creative Director's Office	200 sq. ft.
Private Conference Room	400 sq. ft.
Break Room/Kitchenette	400 sq. ft.
Admin Restrooms	300 sq. ft.
<i>Administration Suite Subtotal</i>	<i>1,900 sq. ft.</i>

CATEGORY II – OPEN

The ACSA/AISC 2026 Steel Design Student Competition also offers architecture students the opportunity to participate in an open competition with limited restrictions. With the approval of a sponsoring faculty member, students may select a site and building program.

- The Category II program should be of equal complexity as the Category I program.
- Students entering Category II must submit a written building program, including a brief description of the building type, gross square footage, and project location, as part of the online submission in the Program Edits (copy/paste text box).

Restrictions

To enter the open competition students may select any building occupancy other than a dance center.

Students may not enter both categories of the competition.

Construction Type

The design project must be conceived in structural steel construction and must contain at least one space/element that requires long-span steel structure, with special emphasis placed on innovation in steel design. The most compelling proposals will inevitably integrate the use of steel into the design of the project at multiple levels, from primary structure to building envelope and tectonic details.

RESOURCES

An intention of all ACSA competitions is to make students aware that research is a fundamental element of any design solution. Students are encouraged to research material properties and methods of steel construction, as well as precedent projects that demonstrate innovative use of structural steel.

Steel Construction References

- AISC website: For references and quick videos: [AISC.org/ArchEducation](https://www.aisc.org/ArchEducation) and Steel Rules of Thumb [HERE](#).
- Modern Steel Construction: This authoritative monthly magazine is made available online free of charge. This magazine covers the use of fabricated structural steel in the variety of structural types. It presents information on the newest and most advanced applications of structural steel in a wide range of structures. Issues of Modern Steel Construction (1996 - Present) are available online. Visit [Modern Steel Construction](#) to view them.
- Terri Meyer Boake. Understanding Steel Design: An Architectural Design Manual. (Birkhäuser 2013)
- John Fernandez. Material Architecture. (Spon Press, 2006)
- Victoria Bell and Patrick Rand. Materials for Design 2. (Princeton Architectural Press, 2014)
- Shulitz, Habermann, Sobek. Steel Construction Manual. (Birkhäuser Basel 2000)
- Annette LeCuyer. Steel and Beyond. (Birkhäuser Basel 2003)
- Sutherland Lyall. Remarkable Structure: Engineering today's Innovative Buildings. (Princeton Architectural Press, 2002)

Ballet, Dance, & Performance Studio References

- [Ballet Memphis – Memphis, TN. Archimania, 2017](#)
- [English National Ballet – London, England. Glen Howells, 2019](#)
- [Perelman Performing Arts Center at WTC – New York, NY. REX, 2023](#)
- [Opera & Ballet House – Oslo, Norway. Snohetta, 2007](#)
- [The Shed – New York, NY. DSR, 2019](#)
- [160 Laban Dance Centre – London, UK. Herzog & de Meuron, 2003](#)
- [The Reach at Kennedy Ctr – Washington, DC. Steven Holl, 2019](#)
- [Student Performing Arts Center – Philadelphia, PA. Steven Holl, \(in construction\)](#)
- [Franklin & Marshall Winter Visual Arts Center – Lancaster, PA. Steven Holl, 2020](#)
- [Richard B. Fisher Ctr for Performing Arts – Kingston, NY. Frank Gehry Partners, 2003](#)
- [Lindemann Performing Arts Center at Brown University – Providence, RI. REX, 2023](#)

COMPETITION GUIDELINES (Category I & Category II)

SCHEDULE

April 8, 2026	Registration Deadline (free registration)
June 3, 2026	Submission Deadline
Summer 2026	Winners Announced
Fall 2026	Publication of Summary Book

USE OF STEEL

Steel must be used as the primary structural material. Design proposals must contain at least one space/element that requires long-span steel structure, with special emphasis placed on innovation in steel design. The most compelling proposals will inevitably integrate the use of steel into the design of the project at multiple levels, from primary structure to building envelope and tectonic details.

BUILDING CODE

Refer to the International Building Code and the local zoning ordinance for information on parking requirements, height restrictions, setbacks, easements, flood, egress and fire containment. All proposals must be designed to meet requirements for accessibility; for guidelines, refer to the Americans with Disabilities Act and the principles of Universal Design.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) and computational design are providing students and architects with new labor-saving tools and transforming many of the tasks associated with project delivery. The proliferation of AI use in practice and academia is raising legitimate questions about how the responsibility and accountability of the architect and students might be altered by this technological wave.

- AI usage in student submissions must ensure the students remain responsibly in control and continue to be accountable for all images and likenesses in their submissions.
- AI is a tool — it is not a replacement for professional judgment. Regardless of the AI tools used, it remains the architecture student's responsibility to provide designs in conformance with academic integrity.

Students choosing to use AI as a tool must attribute this use in their design essay (abstract). Students are accountable for the originality, validity, and integrity of the content and designs of their submissions. In choosing to use AI tools, students are expected to do so responsibly and with a high standard of ethical conduct. This includes reviewing the outputs of any AI tools and confirming content accuracy.

REGISTRATION

Faculty To Complete One Online Registration For Each Entry

A faculty sponsor is required to enroll students online (available at www.acsa-arch.org) by April 8, 2026. Registration can be done for your entire studio or for each individual student or team of students participating. Students or teams wishing to enter the competition on their own must have a faculty sponsor, who should complete the registration. There is no entry or submission fee to participate in the competition. Each registered student and faculty sponsor will receive a confirmation email that will include information on how the student(s) will upload final submissions online. Please add the email address competitions@acsa-arch.org to your address book to ensure that you receive all emails regarding your submission.

During registration the faculty will have the ability to add students, add teams, assign students to teams, and add additional faculty sponsors. Registration is required by April 8, 2026, but can be changed, edited, and added to until a student starts a final submission; then the registration is no longer editable.

Registration Steps

1. Faculty log into the [ACSA website](#),
2. Click the “Register your Students” button,
3. Select the 2026 Steel Competition (Category I or II) from the submission type dropdown menu & Click “Enter”,
4. Select “Individual Registration” to add individual student. Click “Save and Continue”. You will need to know each student’s first & last names, email, & institution, which are all required fields for each student,
5. Select “Team Registration” if this is a team registration, you may add additional students by clicking “Add Student” to the same submission to this team, teams must be limited to a maximum of five students,
6. Once the individual student or team is complete, Click “Submit”,
7. Repeat steps 3 – 6 for each individual or team.

Faculty Responsibility

The administration of the competition at each institution is left to the discretion of the faculty within the guidelines set forth in this document. Work on the competition should be structured over the course of one semester during the 2025-2026 academic year.

Each faculty sponsor is expected to develop a system to evaluate the students’ work using the criteria set forth in this program. The evaluation process should be an integral part of the design process, encouraging students to scrutinize their work in a manner similar to that of the jury.

SUBMISSION

Digital Submission Format

Submissions must be presented on four 20” x 20” digital boards. All boards are required to be uploaded through the ACSA website as BMP, GIF, JPEG, JPG, or PNG files. The names of student participants, their schools, or faculty sponsors, must NOT appear on the boards, or in the project title or project title file name(s).

Design Essay Or Abstract

A brief essay, 300 words maximum, is required as part of the submission describing the most important concepts of the design project. Keep in mind that the presentation should graphically convey the design solution and context, and not rely on the design essay to convey a basic understanding of the project. The names of student participants, their schools, or faculty sponsors, must NOT appear in the design essay. This abstract is included in the final online submission, completed by the student(s) in a simple copy/paste text box.

Program Summary

A program summary diagram/text of spaces and areas is required as part of the submission, 300 words maximum. All interior and exterior spaces are to be included; total net and gross areas are required.

Required Submission Documents

Submissions must include (but are not limited to) the following required drawings:

- Three-dimensional representations - in the form of axonometrics, perspectives showing the proposal in its context, montages and/or physical model photographs – to illustrate the character of the project;
- Site plan showing proposal in its context of surrounding buildings and topography, together with details of access/circulation;
- Building/site sections sufficient to show site context and major spatial and program elements;
- Floor plans to show program elements, spatial adjacencies and navigation strategies;
- Large scale drawing(s), either orthographic or three dimensional, illustrating:
 - the use and detailing of steel for building structure and/or envelope
 - integrated design

Incomplete or undocumented entries will be disqualified. All drawings should be presented at a scale appropriate to the design solution and include a graphic scale. The site plan should include a north arrow.

Online Project Submission

The student is required to submit the final entries that must be uploaded through the ACSA Competition website at www.acsa-arch.org by 11:59 pm, Pacific Time, on June 3, 2026. If the submission is from a team of students, all student team members will have the ability to upload the digital files. It is recommended that one team member completes the final submission upload. Faculty have the option to submit the student's final boards when needed. The submission is not complete until the "submit" button has been clicked. Once the final submission is uploaded and submitted, each student will receive a confirmation email notification.

The final submission upload must contain the following:

- Completed online registration including all team members and faculty sponsors,
- Each of the four 20"x20" boards uploaded individually as a high resolution BMP, GIF, JPEG, JPG, or PNG file,
- A design essay or abstract (300 words maximum),
- A program summary diagram/text of spaces and areas (300 words maximum).

The names of student participants, their schools and faculty sponsors must NOT appear on the boards, abstract, program summary, or in the file name.

Winning projects will be required to submit high-resolution original files/images for use in competition publications and exhibit materials. By uploading your files, you agree that the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) has the rights to use your winning submission, images and materials in a summary publication, online and in promotional and exhibition resources. ACSA will attribute authorship of the winning design to you, your team, faculty and affiliation. Additionally, you hereby warrant that the submission is original and that you are the author(s) of the submission.

Performance Evaluation *(Required for Category I only. Not required for Category II.)*

Each student will answer a few multiple-choice questions upon submission about a performance analysis topic determined by the faculty or student(s). If possible, please show your performance evaluations on your submission boards and images. For the list of questions and an expanded explanation of this, please refer to the Supplemental [Studio Guide](#) and these questions:

1. What category of performance did you measure or assess in your design?
2. What standard or benchmark did you measure against?
3. How did your final design performance compare with your standard or benchmark?
4. If you measured and your design performance was below the standard or benchmark, did you redesign and measure or assess again?

COMPETITION ORGANIZERS

Administrative Organization

Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA)

Leading Architectural Education and Research

ACSA is a nonprofit, membership association founded in 1912 to advance the quality of architectural education. The school membership in ACSA has grown from 10 charter members to over 250 schools in several membership categories. These include full membership for all accredited programs in the United States and government-sanctioned schools in Canada, candidate membership for schools seeking accreditation, and affiliate membership for schools for two-year and international programs. Through these schools, over 5,000 architecture faculty members are represented. In addition, over 500 supporting members composed of architecture firms, product associations and individuals add to the breadth of interest and support of ACSA goals. ACSA provides a major forum for ideas on the leading edge of architectural thought. Issues that will affect the architectural profession in the future are being examined today in ACSA member schools.

Competition Sponsor

American Institute of Steel Construction (AISC)

The AISC, headquartered in Chicago, is a non-partisan, not-for-profit technical institute and trade association established in 1921 to serve the structural steel design community and construction industry in the United States. AISC's mission is to make structural steel the material of choice by being the leader in structural-steel-related technical and market-building activities, including: specification and code development, research, education, technical assistance, quality certification, standardization, market development, and advocacy. AISC has a long tradition of service to the steel construction industry providing timely and reliable information.

Membership to AISC is free to university faculty and full-time students, and AISC membership provides valuable benefits. Information can be found at www.aisc.org/universityprograms.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Program updates, including information on jury members as they are confirmed, may be found on the ACSA web site at www.acsa-arch.org/competitions. Additional questions on the competition program and submissions should be addressed to:

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Competition Program written and developed by: Anthony Monica, Belmont University, along with ACSA & AISC.

Anthony Monica, AIA, is an architect and educator whose teaching is deeply informed by his passion for design thinking and his extensive professional experience. Having practiced at distinguished international design firms, he brings a wealth of knowledge to the classroom, integrating the complexities of contemporary practice into architectural education. His expertise

spans the design, management, and execution of highly crafted, complex projects, offering students meaningful insights from every facet of the profession.

Anthony's pedagogy is rooted in the exploration of design methodologies through an iterative process framed by critical inquiry. By structuring his studios to reflect the dynamics of professional practice, he challenges students to think critically and engage in meaningful discourse as a model for lifelong learning. His teaching emphasizes architecture's deep relationship to place and culture, encouraging students to investigate process, tectonics, materiality, sustainability, and vernacular fabrication methodologies as integral components of contemporary design.

Anthony believes in the transformative potential of architecture and is passionate about equipping students with the skills and perspectives necessary to effect positive change in the built environment. He is a graduate of Virginia Tech, where he earned a Bachelor of Architecture and a Master of Building Construction Science and Management.