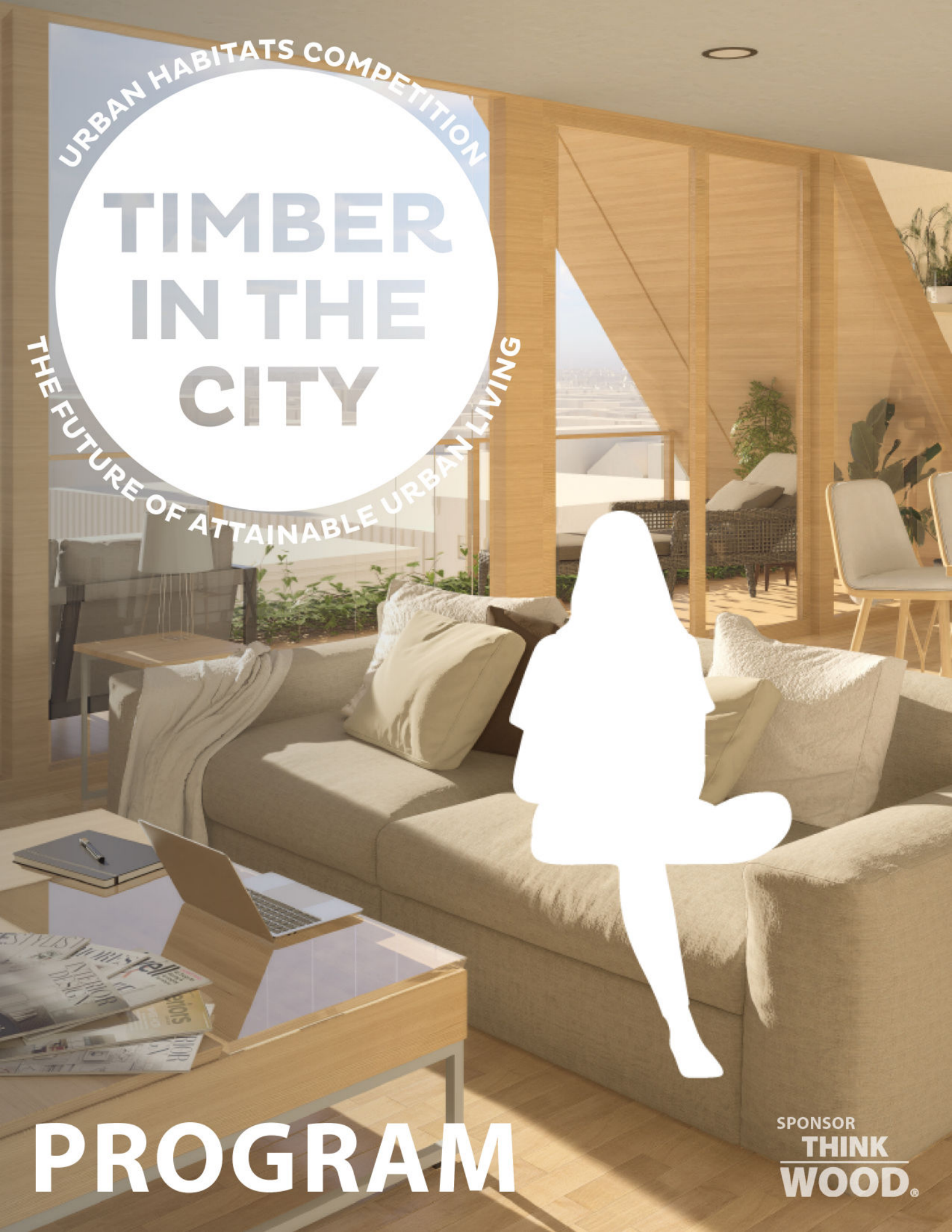
URBAN HABITATS COMPETITION

TIMBER IN THE CITY

THE FUTURE OF ATTAINABLE URBAN LIVING



PROGRAM

SPONSOR
THINK WOOD®

2026 TIMBER IN THE CITY
Urban Habitats Competition

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) and Think Wood are pleased to announce **TIMBER IN THE CITY 6: Urban Habitats Competition** for the 2025-2026 academic year. The program is intended to challenge students, working individually or in teams, to reimagine the boundaries of wood construction in the urban environment, leading to the transformation of our existing cities through constructing sustainable buildings made from renewable resources, offering expedient affordable construction, innovating with new and traditional wood materials, and designing healthy living and working environments. Now in its sixth cycle, the series continues to push the urban potential of wood—this year by tackling the "missing-middle" gap between single-family dwellings and high-rise apartments. Entrants will deploy innovative, highly replicable wood-based systems on a real, under-utilized urban site to deliver attainable, human-scaled housing that strengthens community resilience and climate stewardship. This year's competition will focus on 3 prize levels – Small Buildings (under 1,000 sq ft), Medium Buildings (up to 10,000 sq ft), and Large Buildings (up to 20,000 sq ft).

The Challenge

This competition challenges students to design *attainable housing*—inclusive, sustainable, and thoughtfully designed dwellings that meet the needs of the urban middle class. *Attainable housing* is an understanding that well designed spaces are for all people. Entrants should integrate site conditions, building scales, material strategies, and programmatic elements to develop visionary yet practical solutions that rethink how we live in cities today. A successful submission should develop a **prototype** (or set of prototypes) that:

- **Bridges the scale gap**—offer missing-middle typologies such as ADUs, duplexes, four-plexes, courtyard clusters, flex-live/work units, small walk-ups, and neighborhood infill up to 20 000 ft².
- Leverages **advanced wood technologies**—incorporate mass timber components, panelized light-frame assemblies, and digitally-fabricated elements produced offsite.
- Demonstrates **affordability, constructability, and carbon responsibility**—lower embodied carbon, streamline on-site labor, enable rapid erection, and ensure long-term operational efficiency.
- **Raises project value**—by delivering universal design, healthy biophilic materials, abundant daylight and ventilation, and generous shared indoor-outdoor spaces.
- **Responds to context**—integrates with existing fabric, respects neighborhood scale, and activates the public realm

Together, these goals ask proponents to reimagine wood as both a structural system and a civic catalyst—one that lowers embodied carbon, raises design quality and occupant well-being, while building stronger, more inclusive communities. By meeting the brief, entrants will demonstrate how wood can deliver attainable, climate-positive housing that cities everywhere can replicate.

Wood

The competition challenges participants to interpret, invent, and deploy numerous methods of building systems, with a focus on innovations in wood design on a real site. Wood, including modern mass timber systems and panelized light-frame assemblies, combine carbon storage, low embodied energy, speed of construction, and warm biophilic interiors. Submissions should leverage:

- Cross Laminated Timber (CLT), Glulam, Nail Laminated Timber (NLT), or Dowel Laminated Timber (DLT) for primary structure.
- Panelized light-frame walls and/or floors for rapid closed-wall delivery.
- Digital fabrication (CNC, robotic milling) and offsite prefabrication for precision, efficiency, and waste reduction.

Wood is a natural, renewable, and sustainable material for building, with less environmental impact than other structural materials. Wood stores carbon and, with the least embodied energy of all major building materials, it requires less energy from the raw material extraction, transportation to the manufacturing facility, and production. Moreover, harvesting and replanting increases forests' carbon sink potential as the rate of sequestration is greater during young, vigorous growth. Active forest management or forest thinning mitigates wildfires, cuts carbon emissions, replenishes area waterways, expands wildlife habitat, and creates jobs in rural areas.

Schedule

April 8, 2026	Registration Deadline (*free registration)*
June 3, 2026	Submission Deadline
Summer 2026	Winners Announced

Awards

Winning students and their faculty sponsors will receive cash prizes totaling **$40,000**. The design jury will meet in the summer of 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 website (www.acsa-arch.org).

Small Building		***Medium Building***		***Large Building***	
First Prize		*First Prize*		*First Prize*	
Student	$6,500	Student	$6,500	Student	$6,500
Faculty	$2,000	Faculty	$2,000	Faculty	$2,000
Second Prize		*Second Prize*		*Second Prize*	
Student	$3,500	Student	$3,500	Student	$3,500
Faculty	$1,000	Faculty	$1,000	Faculty	$1,000

** With an additional $1,000 for honorable mentions to be determined by the jury.*

Criteria for Judging

Criteria for the judging of submissions will include: softwood lumber as the primary structural material, creative and innovative use of wood in the design solution, successful response of the design to its surrounding context, the creative and clear approaches to designing a healthy urban mixed-use environment with wood as a central material, successful response to basic architectural concepts such as human activity needs, commitment to meeting the needs of underserved communities, structural integrity, and coherence of architectural vocabulary.

The Jury will judge each student design proposal based on of the following criteria:

- The quality of the architectural concept and the rigor with which it is developed; Its technical sophistication, resolution, structural feasibility, and use of softwood lumber (e.g. dimensional lumber, heavy timber, mass timber, etc.).
- The effectiveness of its visualization and representation through a variety of material, graphic, and digital media, those prescribed within each studio section as well as other techniques that students may employ to supplement and substantiate their presentations.
- The breadth of design consideration with respect to the environmental and social implications and impacts of the building proposed and the way in which those concerns are quantified and visualized.
- A successful sustainability and lower carbon building performance.

Supporting Learning Objectives of the Competition:

- Explore structured collaborative work among students and faculty in addition to individual proposals.
- Incorporation of outside community of specialists into discovery and learning process.
- Identify and experiment with specific tools for integrated thinking and making.
- Create and follow a structured workflow for innovation and iteration.
- Specific emphasis on evidence of physical modeling, making, and mock-ups.
- Distill key findings into a compelling discovery and proposal that has a conceptual and physical imperative and is fully described.

Eligibility

Because the support of Think Wood is derived from companies whose markets are mainly in the U.S., the Timber in the City 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. and Canada. Students may work individually or in teams and must work with a faculty sponsor on the submission.

Faculty who teaches at an ACSA member school are required to enroll students by completing an online registration form prior to registration by **April 8, 2026.** 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.

PROGRAM

Envisioning Attainable Urban Living

This competition challenges participants to explore innovative, practical visions for the future of urban living—specifically, through the lens of *attainable housing*. Entrants are asked to imagine how housing can be made more accessible to middle-income households in ways that are both contextually responsive and architecturally compelling.

Attainable Housing Defined

Attainable housing—including the "missing-middle" spectrum of ADUs, duplexes, triplexes, courtyard cottages, and other low-to mid-rise multifamily buildings—serves middle-income individuals and families who are increasingly priced out of urban markets. Unlike *affordable housing*, which refers to income-restricted housing that's publicly subsidized, *attainable housing* is market-rate housing that focuses on affordability through efficient and repeatable design, intelligent material use, and integration into existing urban infrastructure. This can include smaller dwelling units, duplexes, townhomes, or condominium developments.

Primary Objective

The core of each proposal must focus on attainable urban housing. Proposals should present a clear strategy for increasing residential density within existing urban contexts. This can be achieved through a site-specific design intervention or a replicable housing typology applicable across multiple urban settings. The design must address the constraints and opportunities inherent in city living, such as limited space, mixed-use zoning, and community integration.

Optional Program Elements

While the primary program is residential, entrants may choose to incorporate additional programmatic functions—such as commercial spaces, recreational facilities, or educational/community uses—based on site-specific and community needs. These elements are optional but can add richness to the urban experience and improve overall livability.

Design Considerations

Submissions should thoughtfully address the following design inquiries:

- Urban Context: What is the relationship between the proposed dwelling units and the existing urban fabric? How does the design respond to surrounding scale, massing, infrastructure, and neighborhood character?
- Interior/Exterior Integration: Within the unit or housing complex, how are indoor and outdoor spaces connected? How do uses and views relate to one another? What role does daylight play in the organization and experience of space?
- Material Health and Performance: What health and sustainability issues are associated with the choice of building materials? How can wood be leveraged—not only for their environmental benefits but also for their aesthetic, tactile, and spatial qualities?

Material Focus: Wood

Entrants are required to use softwood lumber-based construction systems as the primary structural and material approach. Submissions should explore how wood can be innovatively employed to promote sustainability, improve occupant well-being, and address the technical and social challenges of urban housing.

Design Scope and Building Scale

Participants are asked to select and design within one of three building scales, depending on the specific needs and character of the chosen site:

- **Small Buildings (under 1,000 sq ft):**
  Single-family homes or duplexes—ideal for infill lots, accessory dwelling units, or compact residential developments. *Designs in the Small Building level may include single-family dwellings, duplexes, triplexes, or micro-unit configurations, provided the total building GFA does not exceed 1,000 sq ft.
- **Medium Buildings (up to 10,000 sq ft):**
  Small condominium buildings or townhouse clusters—suitable for transitional urban zones and moderate-density neighborhoods.
- **Large Buildings (up to 20,000 sq ft):**
  Larger condominium or townhouse complexes—intended for higher-density urban areas with greater infrastructure capacity.

Standard Unit Sizes for Reference
Designs should consider the following suggested sizes for individual residential units:

Micro Unit: 325 sq ft
1 Bedroom: 650 sq ft
2 Bedroom: 850 sq ft
3 Bedroom: 1,000 sq ft

Building Scale Levels and Area Limits: All three competition prize levels- Small, Medium, and Large- are based on Gross Floor Area (GFA), defined as the total area of all floors combined. The stated square footage limits apply to the entire building, not to individual dwelling units.

Permitted Residential Typologies: Permitted Residential Typologies: All residential typologies are permitted across the scale levels, including but not limited to ADUs, micro-units, duplexes, triplexes, four-plexes, courtyard clusters, townhomes, live/work units, and small walk-up buildings.

This competition offers students and faculty a chance to tackle one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary architecture: creating inclusive, sustainable, and well-designed housing for the urban middle class. Through careful integration of site, scale, material, and program, entrants are invited to propose visionary yet buildable solutions that reimagine how we live in cities.

SITE
The site for the competition is the choice of the student and/or faculty sponsor and should be an urban site in North America. However, the building should be accessible by alternative 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.

BUILDING CODE
Students should refer to the International Building Code and the local zoning ordinance for information on parking requirements, setbacks, easements, flood, egress, and fire containment. Challenges to conventional rules—parking requirements, for example—are encouraged but should be explained, made explicit and integral to the overall solution.

RULES

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 using AI tools must acknowledge this 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

A faculty sponsor is required to enroll students online (available at 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 Timber Competition from the submission type dropdown menu & Click "Enter",
4. Add an individual student click "Add Student". You will need to know each student's first & last names, email, & institution, which are all required fields for each student,
5. 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 registration.

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.

Digital Submission Format
Submissions must be presented on four 20” x 20” digital boards, no more than 20MB. 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, 300 words maximum, diagram/text of spaces and areas is required as part of the submission. All interior and exterior spaces are to be included; total net and gross areas are required. The program summary is included in the final online submission, uploaded by the student(s) in a simple copy/paste text box.

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 wood 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. Additionally, 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 high-resolution as BMP, GIF, JPEG, JPG, or PNG files, no more than 20MB each,
- 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.

By uploading your files, you hereby warrant that the submission is original and that you are the author(s) of the submission. Additionally, you agree that the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) and the Softwood Lumber Board, and partner programs, has the rights to use your submission, images, and materials. ACSA will attribute authorship of the design to you, your team, faculty and institution.

RESOURCES

Entrants are encouraged to research references that are related to both the topic of the competition and precedent projects that demonstrate innovative use of timber such as those listed below. An intention of all ACSA competitions is to make students aware that research is a fundamental element of any design solution.

Wood Technology

1. Mass Timber Design Manual Vol. 2
2. Mass Timber 101
3. Think Wood Research Library
4. WoodProducts Council
5. US Forest Products Laboratory – Product & Building Systems Research
6. FPInnovations – Product & Building Systems Research
7. American Wood Council – Codes & Standards Support
8. naturally:wood
9. CLT Handbook
10. Timber in the City – Andrew Bernheimer
11. Mass Timber: Design & Research – Susan Jones
12. The Case For Tall Wood Buildings: Second Edition– Michael Green
13. Timber Construction Manual: Sixth Edition - American Institute of Timber Construction
14. Fast+Epp Concept Lab Timber Bay Design Tool

Daylighting

1. Boubekri, Mohamed. Daylighting Design: Planning Strategies and Best Practice Solutions. 2014. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
2. Cooper, Kenneth J. “Study Says Natural Classroom Lighting Can Aid Achievement”. In Washington Post. November 26, 1999. LINK
3. Heschong Mahone Group, Daylighting in Schools, An Investigation into the Relationship between Daylighting and Human Performance, Condensed Report. Fair Oaks, Ca.: Pacific Gas and electric Company. 1999. LINK
4. https://patternguide.advancedbuildings.net/using-this-guide.html
5. Konis, Kyle., and Stephen. Selkowitz. Effective Daylighting with High-Performance Facades Emerging Design Practices. 2017. Green Energy and Technology. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
6. Lechner, Norbert, and C. Wallace. Heating, Cooling, Lighting: Sustainable Design Methods for Architects. Fourth ed. 2015. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
7. Reinhart, Christoph. Daylighting Handbook I. Cambridge, Ma: Building Technology Press. 2014. Print.
8. Reinhart, Christoph. Daylighting Handbook II. Cambridge, MA: Building Technology Press. 2018. Print.

Thermal Comfort and Bioclimatic Design

1. American Institute of Architects (AIA) Research Corporation, United States. Dept. of Energy, and United States. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development. Office of Policy Development and Research. Regional Guidelines for Building Passive Energy Conserving Homes. Washington: U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development: for sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1978. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
2. Brew, James. "Achieving Passivhaus Standard in North America: Lessons Learned." ASHRAE Transactions 117 (2011): 51-58. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
3. Edelstein, Ken. The site, the shade and passive solar. August 16, 2017. Web. Retrieved 7-17-19 10:35PM. LINK
4. Gibson, Scott. “Does Passivhaus work in New Orleans?” in Green Building Advisor 7/18/2011. Retrieved 7/20/2019 1:22 PM LINK
5. Help for CBE Thermal Comfort Tool

6. Hootman, Thomas. Net Zero Energy Design a Guide for Commercial Architecture. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2012. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
7. Knowles, Ralph L. Sun Rhythm Form. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1981. Print.
8. Koti, Ramana & Feucht, Alissa. (2013). Opportunities and Challenges in Employing Energy Analysis Early in the Integrated Design Process. 42nd ASES National Solar Conference 2013
9. (SOLAR 2013). Conference Paper 2013. LINK
10. Lechner, Norbert, and C. Wallace. Heating, Cooling, Lighting: Sustainable Design Methods for Architects. Fourth ed. 2015. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
11. Mazria, Edward. The Passive Solar Energy Book. Expanded Professional ed. Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale, 1979. Print.
12. Milne, Murray, Liggett, Robin, Benson, Andrew, & Bhattacharya, Yasmin. UCLA Department of Architecture and Urban Design. Climate Consultant 4.0 Develops Design Guidelines for Each Unique Climate. American Solar Energy Society, Buffalo, New York, May, 2009. LINK
13. Ness, H.C. Van. Understanding Thermodynamics. Newburyport: Dover Publications, 2012. Dover Books on Physics. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
14. NIST.SP.1204 (re. weather data files accessible through Climate Consultant software)
15. Racusin, Jacob Deva. Essential Building Science: Understanding Energy and Moisture in High Performance House Design. 2016. Sustainable Building Essentials. Web. (Georgia Tech library online access)
16. Reinhart, Christoph. Daylighting Handbook I. Cambridge, Ma.:Building Technology Press. 2014. Print.
17. 2030 Palette: LINK

Sponsor

Think Wood

Think Wood is a communications campaign that provides commercial, multifamily and single-family home design and build resources to architects, developers, and contractors. Think Wood's primary funder is the Softwood Lumber Board. SLB is an industry-funded initiative and was established to promote the benefits and uses of softwood lumber products in outdoor, residential and non-residential construction. Programs and initiatives supported by the SLB focus on increasing the demand for softwood lumber products in the United States.

Administrative Organization

Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture

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.

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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Image Credit: 2024 Timber in the City Competition: 2nd Place Winner.
Project Title: Local Timber
Student: Jarren Amaro
Faculty Sponsor: Peter Raab
Institution: Texas Tech University