

Youth in Arts®

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Contact: Cathy Bowman
(415) 279-1788
cathy@youthinarts.org

YOUTH IN ARTS OPENS ARCHITECTS IN SCHOOLS : DESIGNING COMMUNITY

SAN RAFAEL, CA – How do you build Towers of Power? What should San Rafael’s next library look like? What would a revitalized downtown need to thrive?

Third, fourth and fifth graders at Laurel Dell Elementary School in San Rafael spent 12 weeks in Youth in Arts’ Architects in Schools program learning “design thinking” skills. The drawings and models they created will be showcased in *Architects in Schools: Designing Community*, an online exhibition at the YIA Gallery opening on June 12. The celebration will coincide with San Rafael’s 2nd Fridays Art Walk, which will be held virtually.

Students in the program looked at what makes a community thrive and tackled real world problems like affordable housing and climate change. Third graders who studied with Architects Shiril Buss and Barbara Brown considered how to make 4th street – the heart of downtown San Rafael – safe and welcoming for everyone.

They generated innovative ideas that focused on accessibility, mobility, color and fun. Proposals included a lion fountain and an ice skating rink, bicycle lanes framed by trees in the middle of the street, and a crosswalk sprinkled with brightly colored triangular and square shaped tiles.

The students were ready to present their recommendations to the 2040 General Plan Steering Committee when coronavirus concerns forced the March meeting to be cancelled. Recently, some of those students joined Buss and Barry Miller, project manager for San Rafael’s 2040 plan, and presented their ideas on a video call that will be included in the exhibition.

“These students are developing professional skills and cultivating an appetite for civic activism at an early age,” Buss said. “It makes sense that city officials listen and respond, because these children – who will be 30 years old in 2040 – are our most energetic and optimistic residents now, and hopefully will be our leaders of the future.”

Youth in Arts’ Architects in Schools program has been at Laurel Dell for four years and grew out of a partnership between Youth in Arts and UC Berkeley’s YPLAN/Center for Cities + Schools. It is part of a K-5th sequential arts program in which skills are built upon from year to year. This Fall, the program was extended to include students at Short Elementary School; their work is included in the show.

The online exhibition will include a bilingual discussion with Laurel Dell and Short Principal Pepe Gonzalez. Viewers can also enjoy a video that is a virtual tour of the art, which includes Towers of Powers built by fourth graders from wood scraps; observational drawings; and fifth graders’ plans for how to create a welcoming entrance to San Rafael’s future library. Art lovers who pass by Youth in Arts’

office at 917 C St. will be treated to a window display of models and drawing until the show closes in August.

This is not the first time Laurel Dell students have addressed city officials. Last year, fifth graders working with Buss presented their ideas for adapting to sea level rise and other environmental issues facing the city. A few of the students wrote about their experience, and their recommendations were published in a [Marin IJ opinion piece](#) last January.

Youth in Arts is an arts education nonprofit that has served more than a million children since it was founded nearly 50 years ago. When the coronavirus prompted shelter in place restrictions, it was one of the first education nonprofits in the Bay Area to explore distance learning. Its mission is to support creativity, confidence and compassion with customized programs in visual art, music, theater and dance that are designed to reach all learners of all abilities.

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