

Beyond shelter: ASU students design community housing to heal

Architecture studios integrate beauty, connection for homeless people in Sierra Vista, Arizona

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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People experiencing homelessness need more than shelter. They also deserve beautiful and thoughtful design.

A group of architecture students at Arizona State University has spent the school year carrying out that premise by designing housing for homeless people that integrates nature, healing and community.

The undergraduate and graduate students worked on a real-life project to be built in the southern Arizona community of Sierra Vista. Their designs incorporated practical features like maximum shade and amenities such as a library, garden, music room and a daycare center — all at a minimal cost.

Besides the transitional housing, the 100-home community will also include low-income units and workforce dwellings, to be built by Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona and the Sierra Vista Investment Development Agency.

The students presented their final designs to their peers, faculty and local professionals on Friday.

“Our project and our manifesto is rooted in three things — recovery, community and harmony,” said Sean Maseng, a graduate student who was one of the presenters for his group. Their design, called Tessera, had two community centers and colorful, cantilevered units to create shade, all set up in a parallel avenue system.

“We believe avenues create small, spontaneous little actions of community while still maintaining a shared sense of privacy,” he said.

The fall and spring studio courses were done in partnership with Massive Change Network, a Chicago-based design agency co-founded by Institute Professor [Bruce Mau](#) and Aiyemobisi “Bisi” Williams, a consulting architect for The Design School. Mau and Williams, partners in work and life, taught the studio courses with Professor Claudio Vekstein, head of the architecture program, and James Wesala, an assistant teaching professor.

The idea started in 2024, when Massive Change Network screened a documentary at ASU called “I Have A Name,” in which artist and activist Jon Linton met with people living on the streets of Phoenix. He began photographing them, which led to a book, an exhibition and then the documentary.

After that screening, Massive Change helped to organize a studio course in which a small group of architecture students worked on issues around homelessness.

Last summer, Williams attended the 2025 Arizona Housing Forum in Tucson, where she connected with Terrance Watkins, the executive director of housing for Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona, who told her that the organization had a plot of land in Sierra Vista and needed a housing plan to build on it.

Williams, Mau and the Herberger Institute team then scrambled to create a studio of more than 200 fourth-year undergraduate and sixth-year graduate students for the fall semester.

The students visited the Sierra Vista site, met with local officials and talked to people who had experienced homelessness, who were initially hesitant to share their desires, according to Williams.

“I said, ‘Tell us what you would want, aside from your needs. What would make your life beautiful?’

“And we heard, ‘A library, an art room, a music room, gardens, places to make things, cooking.’ There was a little boy, and he said, ‘A playground,’” she said.

The students rigorously researched how trauma-informed design can help people experiencing homelessness, she said.

“Architects and designers don’t pretend to be doctors, but there are things that we can do with materials, environment and sound to mitigate that trauma and to promote healing and wellness,” she said.

[Renee Cheng](#), an architect and dean of the Herberger Institute, researches how teams collaborate on challenging projects. She did a training session with the students and sent an anonymous poll asking about their backgrounds.

“We had 30 students that had experienced housing insecurity personally,” Cheng told the crowd at Friday’s presentation event.

“When we are designing for people that have experienced housing insecurity, how do you know that you’re really listening? Some of your classmates may not want to self-identify as someone who has that experience, yet they might be listening to what the clients are saying or working with the agencies in a different way or reacting to ideas in a different way,” she said.

“Be willing to think about these other points of view that are represented.”

The students had to keep the costs as low as possible and account for other factors at the site, including a deep wash and the microclimate, which is subject to heavy monsoon storms. They also got feedback from industry professionals such as engineers and architects.

The fall student teams designed eight master plans, which Watkins narrowed down to five in December.

This past semester, around 40 of the students from the first semester worked in teams to produce detailed construction plans.

At Friday's event, Watkins said that he was very impressed by the students' work when he reviewed it at the end of the fall semester.

“I had goosebumps,” he said.

“This is 10 times above what it was in December. You guys have done an amazing job.”

He shared his own life experience with the students.

“When we started this semester off, I was able to give a lecture to the students about my history — that I used to be homeless. And for me, being homeless was one of the most pivotal, worst moments of my life.

“But it was so bad that it actually spurred change. And it helped create the change that you see today.”

He said the students learned that homelessness is typically caused by a cascade of losses — a job, a vehicle, a house, a relationship.

“When you asked, ‘Who will live here?’ — it's anybody. The best moment was when the students got to see that this is who we're serving,” Watkins said.

Maseng said the site visits were crucial.

“Not only did the city introduce us to the site, we also got to walk down into the wash, fly some drones around and do all this crazy stuff,” he said.

“Then they had their whole city planning team come out and sit with us and talk about issues that we can expect and really give us a whole rundown. Starting from the very beginning, we've had so much support.”

The students expressed gratitude for being able to work on such a meaningful project.

Sneha Dhileep, who is graduating with her master's degree, said that international students don't always expect to be so embedded into a community.

“We decide on a school and come here and it's all about how you learn a certain set of criteria and then you leave — never that you would get an opportunity like this,” she said.

“We started the semester with an intense learning of the data and figuring out what and why and how to resolve (homelessness). I'm really grateful for having a real-life project experience in school.”

Taylor Gentry, who is graduating with her bachelor's degree this month, said that when she and the other undergraduates started the project last fall, they didn't realize the scope of it.

“Being able to continue with the sixth years as mentors and guides made the project very personal. I didn't think I would enjoy it so much,” she said.

“This studio has helped me fall back in love with architecture and realize why I started.”

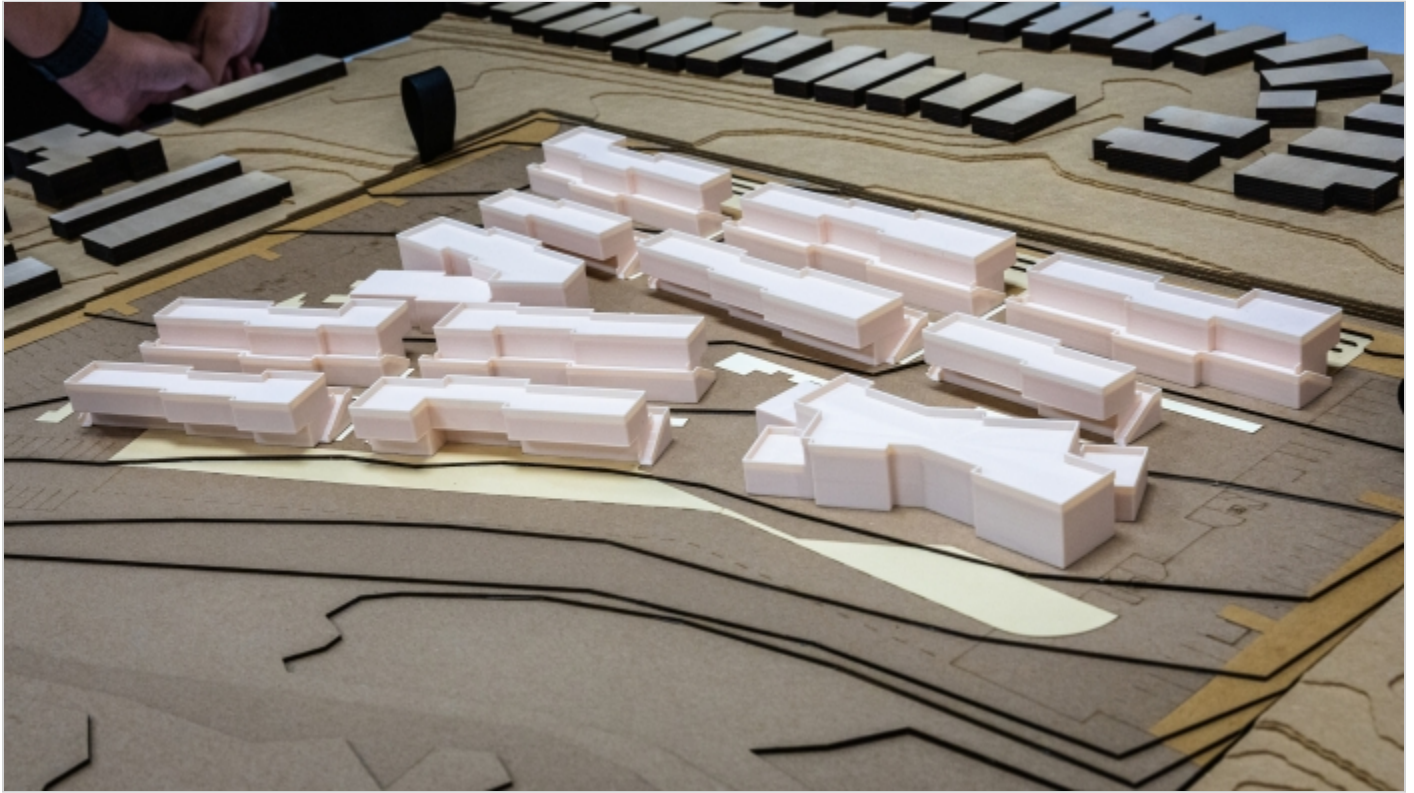
This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Architecture graduate student Sean Maseng discusses Tessera, the team's housing project for homeless residents in Sierra Vista, Arizona, on Friday, May 1, at The Design School on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



A 3D-printed model of the students' multifamily, low-income housing project was on display at the presentation event on Friday, May 1. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Architecture graduate student Jacob Steinkamp (left) shares plans for the Tessera housing project on Friday, May 1, at The Design School on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Architecture faculty member Arne Emerson (left) studies the model for Tessera community housing project as Reneé Cheng (second from left), dean of the Herberger Institute, looks on. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News