

Young Minds and Their Mentors: Salvadori Charrette - New York 200
by Abigail Caplovitz and Lorraine Whitman
June 15, 1998

Ten teams of young teens from ten of the city's public middle schools created visions of "the heart of New York" in 2098, the 200th anniversary of the final consolidation of the five boroughs into a single, great city. These budding builders were brought together with volunteer architects and engineers by the Salvadori Center, which runs programs in each of their schools. The students were assigned to large, butcher-paper covered tables stocked with construction materials like plastic straws, pipe cleaners and tissue paper. No more than two students from the same class were assigned to a single team. Each team worked with two volunteer professionals, its process observed and evaluated by teachers who had accompanied students to the event. (Teachers, however, were not allowed to evaluate their own students.) At the end of the day the students reassembled at the front of the beautiful Great Hall of Architecture at the City College of New York and took turns presenting their creations.

The cityscapes produced by the teams varied greatly in their focus, although all of them created multi-centered visions because of the broad consensus that New York City had many hearts. Some built the classic landmarks; others created futuristic places like a zoo in which each animal was displayed on its own TV and could be experienced via virtual reality. Transportation was a common theme. Several teams designed train systems powered by solar or other non-polluting energy sources that floated above their tracks on magnets. One team broadened its agenda to include science fiction inventions like a machine that could turn teachers on and off and do homework. The event was a great success.

The Salvadori Center was established in 1987 by Mario Salvadori, renowned engineer, author and professor of architecture and engineering, when he was 80 years young. The core tenet of the Salvadori educational philosophy holds that all children, regardless of socioeconomic background, are capable of absorbing and applying even the most abstract mathematical and scientific concepts. The method is simple yet effective: engage the children by having them design or build something and then guide them to understand the mathematical and scientific principles underlying their creation. Each year, the Center runs successful programs in a dozen schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the city.

ICIS collaborated on this event because it epitomizes the best current practice in teaching middle school children about infrastructure. The Salvadori Center is an ICIS partner and its director, Lorraine Whitman, serves on the ICIS Executive Committee. ICIS will continue to work extensively with the Salvadori Center in the future.