

Architecture students give local bookstore new life

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At the Community Book Center in New Orleans' Seventh Ward, fourth-year architecture student Cassidy Self puts the finishing touches on a renovation project that was designed, fabricated and installed by students working through the Small City Center. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

When Vera Warren Williams enters her freshly renovated Community Book Center at 2523 Bayou Road in New Orleans, she can scarcely believe it is the same space that she has struggled to maintain since opening the Seventh Ward location in 2003.

With its expanded children's area, performance spaces, a gallery for artwork, contemporary shelving and African-inspired furnishings, she envisions the center as a hub for school and day care center field trips.

"Our focus has always been on children and young people but the new makeover will allow us to reach even more young people and address literacy at an even younger age," Williams said.

Williams is grateful to the [Albert Jr. and Tina Small City Center](#), the community design center that is part of the Tulane University [School of Architecture](#). As part of their final design-build project, 14 students did the bulk of the work, from client and community interviews, to design, fabrication and installation.

The process began last year when City Center, which provides high-quality design assistance for nonprofit groups that are traditionally underserved by the design profession, put out its annual request for proposals. Williams' proposal was one of over 20 project proposals submitted.

"There was a lot of enthusiasm and excitement about this project," said Emilie Taylor, design build manager and professor of practice. "Our goal was to create a space that reflects the center's identity as an African American-centered educational home, while becoming more accessible for new families and visitors coming to this rapidly changing neighborhood."

Williams said she feels fortunate to have been chosen as one of City Center's projects.

"Until now it had been an uphill battle trying to make the space appealing and comfortable while staying on top of changes in the book industry. But today I feel we have a new focus, a redirection. For us, this makeover is a blessing."

Community Book Center will hold a reopening celebration on Wednesday (April 27), from 4 to 6 p.m.

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