OCAD okays high-tech plan

Portage Project offers new ways for school to interact with the public

Joseph Wilson

OCAD President Sara Siamond vows to turn John and McCaul around Grange Park into virtual street theatre.

The Ontario College of Art and Design has a history of being innovative. From the giant chess-board-on-crayons addition that transformed McCaul in 2004 to the cops who ballroom-danced their way through last year's Nuit Blanche, the school has made waves before, so it's no surprise that it's now poised to become a leader in the use of technology.

The idea is to create a space where artists can interact with the public via wireless technologies. The initiative, called the Portage Project, is funded by the Department of Canadian Culture and builds on research being conducted by OCAD's Mobile Media Lab.

"My hope is that we can become a major centre of mobile research and design," says Diamond.

I caught up with her at the recent Mobile Nation Conference, where painters rubbed shoulders with tech sector leaders like Marc Davis from Yahoo! Such cross-disciplinary collaboration is great, says Diamond. "We want our students to leave here as successful entrepreneurs as well as expressive people."

Portage Project leaders Geoffrey Shea and Paula Gardner have been busy cultivating partnerships with NGOs and businesses such as local film company Triptych Media. One idea, called AlterAudio, in development with the Music Gallery, would allow people to use their mobile phones as compositional tools. Imagine downloading songs in real time and remixing them on your cellphone with the help of the person standing next to you.

"The Portage Project spans everything from design and commercial media to creating new forms of music or tourist attractions," says Shea. "We want artists, designers and social scientists to take their products to the street and make them interactive," says Gardner. "We need to look at how to make content work in these environments, both technologically and physically."

Another aspect in development is an exhibit looking at Toronto's history in "four dimensions."

"An exhibit might have layers of content ranging from the history of the buildings in the area to a social history of Toronto's neighbourhoods," says Shea.

Diamond describes a set-up that would allow people to interact with the characters in a film being shot as they walk down John.

Just last week, OCAD announced $2 million worth of funding from the province to create in-school programs focused on digital design and IT, including a graduate program for students interested in pursuing art and design through the lens of computer technology.

"Now students can take courses in drawing or painting but also, if they're interested, have better access to computer technologies," says Diamond.

They will also have the opportunity to engage in partnerships with faculties at Ryerson, University of Toronto and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

Diamond bristles at the accusation, suggested in a recent Globe and Mail article, that these new initiatives are replacing conventional art education, which since the 60s has focused on cultivating creativity rather than job preparation.

"Our students already use computers in many different ways. We also have a strong media arts program, so this new initiative just brings together what we currently offer into something that is coherent, allowing students to mix traditional media and digital media.

"The truth is that the largest lobby for these changes came from the student body itself," she says. "Our students are part of the Web 2.0 generation. They're already participants in all kinds of online and mobile applications. They want a school where they can use these as their outlet for expression."

The notion that art students are an inappropriate match for high-tech applications results from trivializing the impact of arts-trained professionals on our economy.

The Globe and Mail's own website offers a feature of photos from around the world presented in Flash animation,

the very kind of programming set to be taught at OCAD.

Once OCAD students get their teeth into these new technologies, expect T.O.'s streetscape to reap the benefits. Diamond foresees that prototypes will be available at the next Nuit Blanche, with finished projects to be rolled out in summer 2008.

So keep your eyes open around OCAD – and be sure to bring your cell-phone.