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photo submitted Miami University's Rachel Momenee created this design for an architecture assignment at the University in which Momenee and her fellow students were assigned to create a design that involved turning the former State Office Building into a bluegrass museum. Momenee who received a BA in architecture in 2010.

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By Steve Vied Messenger-Inquirer |

Depending on how quickly another \$3 million is raised to convert the former State Office Building to an International Bluegrass Music Center and Museum, an architect will eventually be hired to design the transformation. But whoever is selected for that assignment may not have to start from scratch.

In fact, 14 detailed designs, some of them wildly creative and striking in appearance, have already been completed for the repurposing of the two-story building at Second and Frederica streets. On Wednesday morning, the committee that will select an architect for the project got a long look at the designs created by university architecture students.

What they saw they liked, for the most part.

"I was blown away by them," said Gabrielle Gray, executive director of the International Bluegrass Music Museum, which is looking to move into the State Office Building three blocks west of its current location.

A fundraising campaign has already netted about \$4 million toward a goal of \$7 million to pay for the conversion, and the city of Owensboro has committed an additional \$3 million for the project.

Three years ago, Gray talked to her niece, Mary Ben Bonham, an architecture instructor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, about the bluegrass museum's planned move to the State Office Building. From that conversation, Bonham created a design studio assignment involving 14 of her students titled "Living Building/Living Museum" during the fall 2010 semester.

Bonham and her students researched the origins of bluegrass music, studied examples of adaptive reuse of existing buildings and visited the State Office Building. Each student developed a unique design for a new museum, including spaces for exhibits, music performance and education.

"This music transcends its origins," Bonham, an Owensboro native, said. "My students were immediately taken by this music and the opportunity of a new museum to protect and preserve its artifacts. It was quite a challenge to deal with an existing building. What you are doing is totally feasible."

Bonham presented some of the interior and exterior design ideas and images to the museum's architect selection committee at the Owensboro-Daviess County Convention & Visitors Bureau office on Second Street. Several of the students envisioned using the roof of the office building as a performance venue, with grassy areas and dramatic views of the Ohio River and downtown streets and buildings. Others produced eye-popping exteriors of wood, stone and glass. Interior plans called for exhibit areas, a river view restaurant, a performance theater and Hall of Fame in the atrium lobby with skylights above. One student designed the interior around the idea of a giant guitar, while solar panels covered a large section of the roof in another design.

"Just think of the potential of a real landmark on an international scale," said Bonham as she put up a slide of one of the more inspired facade ideas featuring a high peaked canopy over the main entrance.

The subject of cost came up, with everyone understanding that Bonham's students were given free hand to design without cost in mind. Utilizing the roof for a stage or tearing down and replacing the building's walls were dismissed as too expensive. "The structural engineer will shoot that idea in the foot," said structural engineer Ted Lolley of the various rooftop stage designs.

Bonham urged the group to consider hiring an architect and a construction management firm at the same time to keep costs in line with the budget.

"We've got to get somebody to give us a real creative look and keep as much (existing building) as we can," said committee member Bruce Peters.

Committee member Tony Cecil congratulated the students on their work.

"I like the wood and putting some movement in the walls," he said. "It's such a harsh building now."

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