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Civic Urbanism Students Bring Portland Design Ideas Back to Orlando's Creative Village

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Wooden walkway in Portland's Pearl District. Photo by Cathleen Craft.

Nothing makes learning richer than experiencing the subject matter first-hand. This was the thinking behind the recent trip Professor of [Environmental Studies](#) Bruce Stephenson took to Portland, Oregon. Leading 12 students from his [Master of Planning in Civic Urbanism](#) program, Stephenson aimed to give the scholars an up-close perspective of Portland's celebrated urban core in the hopes that they would return to Central Florida with fresh ideas about designs for Orlando's new downtown district, [Creative Village](#).

"Portland is such an excellent laboratory for urban planning studies," said Stephenson. "Over the last 20 years, its vacant downtown industrial areas have been redeveloped and revitalized resulting in urban spaces that continue to win awards for sustainability." Stephenson created the course, *Metropolitan Green Spaces – Portland and Orlando*, so that students could study Portland's innovative designs and then look at Orlando to see how some of these designs could be implemented.

Between July 28 and August 1, he and his students toured Portland, taking note of its green spaces and smart transportation systems. "The trip to Portland was a tangible classroom experience," shared Masters in Civic Urbanism student Zachary Starkey. "We were there to see first-hand Portland's transportation and green infrastructure. It served as a great example of how redevelopment efforts really can transform a whole city, not just an area."

Joining the group was Orlando developer [Craig Ustler](#), adjunct professor Mike Holbroke, and Mike Houck, a legendary Portland figure who pioneered the creation of natural systems in urban settings. "Touring the city with experts in the field, including Mike Houck and Craig Ustler as well as Bruce Stephenson, was a tremendous experience in learning subtle design tools and how they perform in the built environment," shared student Cathleen Craft. "Planning good places is not rocket science, it is an elusive art that defines and gives meaning to our everyday life."

By the time the students returned to Orlando, their brains were packed full of ideas for Creative Village, which they worked tirelessly to summarize in preparation for their presentation to Craig Ustler on August 9. Ustler, who owns 60-acres of land adjacent the [Amway Center](#), was blown away by the creativity and thoroughness of the presentation. Stephenson was immensely proud of their efforts and said, "they did a far better job than I could do."

"The single greatest thing about Portland is the bounty of green spaces, particularly those which mimic European piazzas," said Starkey. "These spaces enabled us to view the Creative Village project through the Portland lens, affording us the opportunity to become emerged in the 'Portland way of thinking' and apply the benefits to a place like Orlando."

As a side project, the students also created a green spaces website that identifies significant pedestrian- or bicycle-oriented green spaces in Metropolitan Orlando. The webpage, which should be completed by the end of September, will serve as a resource for planners and residents alike.

By Kristen Manieri