“Urban Planners of the Future”
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Detailed maps and grids for a future Washington, DC designed to successfully confront rising waters as a result of climate change spread across tables and adorned vertical displays. The hall filled with discussions and debates about additional opportunities for smart growth coupled with green technology: urban green spaces, intentional community meeting places, infrastructure for electric-powered transportation, and mixed-use housing/commercial areas clustered around public venues.

A visitor strolling the second floor of the Cafritz art building on April 20 would have been forgiven for mistaking this lively, multinational meeting for a convention on international urban planning and civic engineering. Instead, the event and its displays, which will remain through the end of the semester, marked the culmination of a three-week intensive unit undertaken by the Academic English Language Program's (AELP) advanced English conversation workshop for foreign students majoring in scientific fields.

Beginning with a field trip to the Building Museum in downtown Washington, students studied existing responses to climate change for low-lying cities and coastal nations. Back in the classroom, they implemented relevant vocabulary in order to discuss current policies and trends nationally and internationally gleaned from readings and multimedia sources. Each student researched and then gave a presentation about responses to climate change in her/his country, and teamed up to debate best future approaches in the US.

Finally, these budding urban planners got to work as small groups of "consultants" charged with developing viable proposals for the DC City Council for optimal approaches to future smart growth and rising/flooding river water. A special guest speaker from the city's Department of Urban Development inspired fruitful questions and a sense of realism and urgency as students launched their projects.

On presentation day, four professors with urban planning and/or civic engineering backgrounds circulated student exhibits to ask questions and discuss the proposals' creativity and viability. Dressed professionally, students engaged their guests as they would expect to at a conference poster session, and further interacted formally with fellow students to debate pros and cons of the different plans.

After the session, students and faculty members alike relaxed and chatted over light refreshments. Reflecting on the experience, Yifei Yu, a Chinese engineering student, said, "I really did not know at the beginning how intensive and valuable this unit would be. I really appreciated this opportunity to practice professional speaking in a realistic environment, and the creativity from each team was amazing!"

That sentiment was echoed by Sandra Genois, a professor currently teaching a course specifically focused on urban planning challenges in an era of rising waters. "These students bring something special to the table: a collective, multinational awareness that there is both an imperative to respond to this issue and numerous ways to do so," she stated. Given their science backgrounds, she added, it was not surprising that they also "demonstrated a willingness to intelligently experiment."

The result? "I saw some wonderful proposals incorporating design elements that not only deal with the natural threat but also proactively respond to it. Washington, DC already has a number of houseboats –

in some of these plans, it would eventually host small floating communities and commercial centers with 100% green technology. I'll probably be talking about these projects in my own class next week!"

Student exhibits will remain in the central upstairs atrium in the Cafritz building through mid-May. Meanwhile, with these projects under their belts, class members are shifting their focus from terrestrial problems to extraterrestrial challenges: how to create a self-sufficient first settlement on Mars. Perhaps Montgomery College will soon claim to have inspired the first Martian urban planners!