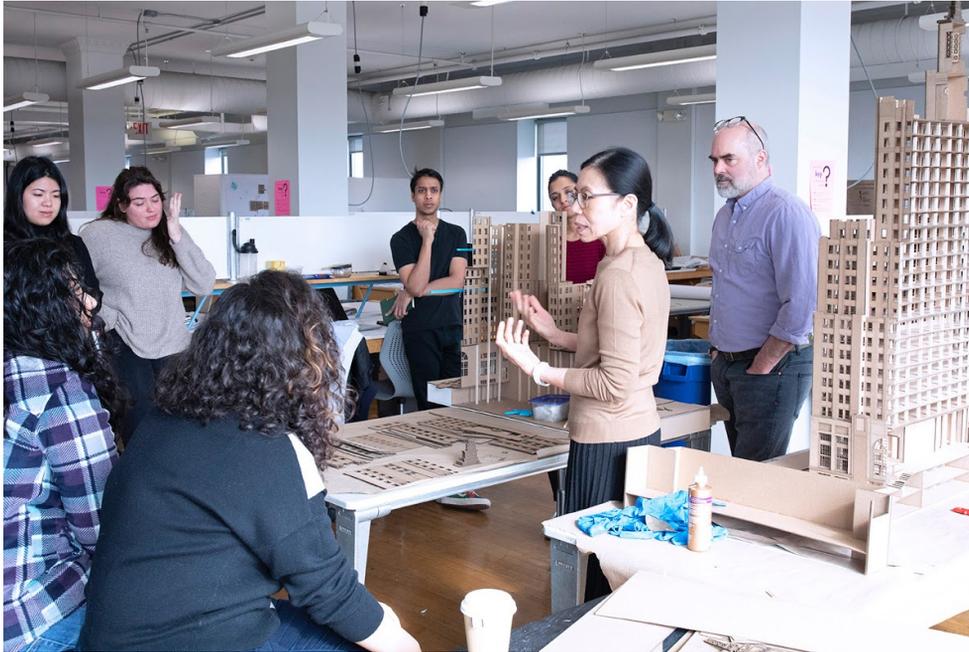


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RISD Interior Architecture Students Envision Bold New Alternatives for the Iconic and Long-Vacant “Superman Building”

In the school’s spring studio ‘Saving Superman’, students submitted adaptive reuse proposals to remove the building from the PPS’s Most Endangered List of properties



Professor Liliane Wong discusses adaptive reuse strategies with students before campus closed due to the pandemic. Courtesy Rhode Island School of Design.

PROVIDENCE, RI (June 3, 2020) – With an iconic building in Providence approaching its eighth year of vacancy, [Rhode Island School of Design](#) (RISD) students in a spring studio titled [Saving Superman](#) focused on bringing it back to life. Built in 1928 at the then-impressive height of 428 feet, the Industrial Trust Building is the tallest high-rise in Rhode Island and is informally known as “the Superman Building” due to its resemblance of the Daily Planet offices in the DC Comics series. With estimates for bringing the building up to code nearing \$150 million, its 26 floors hold both a huge amount of potential and risk for developers and preservationists alike.

“We believe there is great potential in this building,” says RISD Interior Architecture Department Head **Liliane Wong**. “Working within the spirit of professional practice and respecting the building’s historic and artistic character, students conducted a wide range of design investigations informed by the local community’s social and economic needs.”

Those investigations were at the heart of the graduate studio co-taught by Wong and faculty members [Elizabeth Debs](#) and [Jonathan Bell](#). It provided students earning their master’s degrees in [Adaptive Reuse](#) with the opportunity to envision bold new alternatives for the long-vacant building. It also allowed them to collaborate with such key partners as the Providence Preservation Society (PPS) and the City Planning Office.

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At a final critique—conducted virtually on May 22—students presented socially responsible approaches to reviving the building. **The students' proposals are as follows:**

[Super Farmer by Shreya Anand](#)

Since the historic building is renowned for its culinary wealth, Shreya Anand suggests that it has the potential to become part of the city's food culture through urban agriculture. Anand's proposal transforms the Art Deco high-rise into a vertical urban farm, using state-of-the-art hydroponic technology to serve not only RI but also its neighboring states. She suggests a 20+ story central atrium provides visitors with a harvest experience all year round while restaurants at the top offer vertical farm to table dining.



Super Farmer by Shreya Anand. Courtesy Rhode Island School of Design.

[Synaptic City by Michele Katora](#)

Michele Katora's 'Synaptic City' proposes for Superman to reclaim its symbolic identity as a tower of innovation. Katora proposes a biotech and life science innovation hub, framing collaborative interactions through the spatial plasticity of modular laboratories. By solely retaining Superman's skeletal structure, 'Synaptic City' activates as a network of cells: each laboratory a temporal microcosm. Optimized for possibility, from the creation of wind turbines, interstellar satellites, AI neural interfaces, or the vaccine for Covid-19, Synaptic City is prepared for dynamic adaptation.

[The Second Act by Ankit Mandawewala](#)

Taking advantage of the building's intricate design, Ankit Mandawewala MA 20 proposes selective reductions in structure that would allow the first few floors to become a series of large theaters and smaller performance spaces. He envisions a jazz bar in the basement, open-air venues at the very top of the building and huge, outward-facing LED screens on the exterior that would serve almost as a drive-in movie theater downtown.

Faculty member Sara Ossana MIA 05 noted that Mandawewala's approach builds on the city's tagline as Rhode Island's "creative capital"—a hub for theaters, public art and creative endeavors.

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Visiting critic Randy Mason—an associate professor of historic preservation at the University of Pennsylvania—also appreciated the overall concept but expressed misgivings about the exterior screens.



The Second Act by Anik Mandawewala. Courtesy Rhode Island School of Design.

[Super Normal by Yiren Mao](#)

“Super Normal” celebrates city living in the post-pandemic city. The historic building is divided into three towers that house various living spaces, offices and communal gathering places -from library and bar to mini-grocer and pet store- catering to a young workforce. ‘Neighborhoods’ are created every four floors through interconnected stairs in a vertical social distancing within this urban community. A built-in outdoor dog park allows for the companionship of animal friends in this new normal of living.

[Expedition Superman by Nameera Najib](#)

Nameera Najib MA 20 clearly considered interactivity when she conceived of a plan for housing Hasbro’s corporate offices along with an exploratorium or science center in the lower part of the building, complete with a domed planetarium.

Visiting critic and architect Pamela Hawkes (who also teaches at Penn) applauded her “masterful job of layering different program elements,” while PPS Director Rachel Robinson felt that her approach “really communicates how special this building is.”

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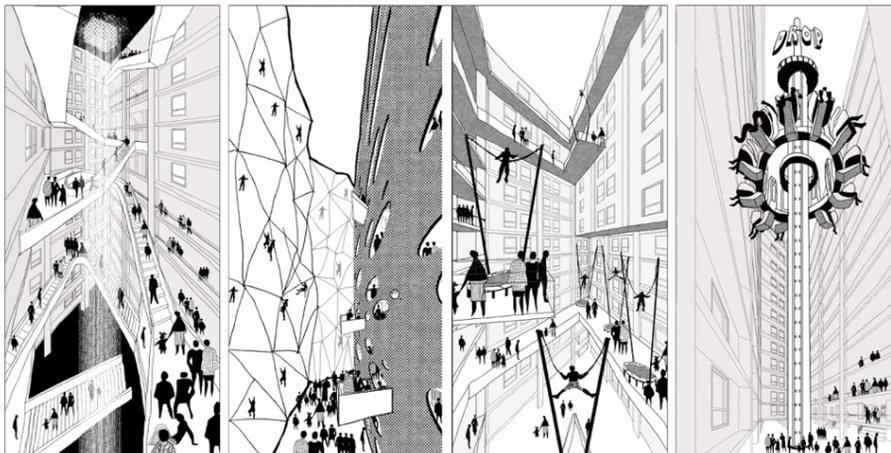
Plans for a spacious, light-filled assisted living facility by Rashmi Ravishankar MA 20.
Courtesy Rhode Island School of Design.

[Beyond Years by Rashmi Ravishankar](#)

The approach presented by Rashmi Ravishankar MA 20 puts senior citizens front and center, reshaping the space into a light and airy assisted living facility with terraced gardens and built-in healthcare resources. In response to COVID-19, Ravishankar's research provided details around issues such as air quality and reducing the transmission of viruses, including designing green spaces as a therapeutic tool and to purify indoor air.

[Vertical Thrills by Hongjia Zhou](#)

Taking the idea of family fun to new heights, Hongjia (Mika) Zhou MA 20 proposes a tourist attraction focused on vertical thrills. By turning floors 4 through 14 into one massive vertical space, she could open up space for indoor skydiving, bungee jumping and a huge climbing wall. Critics embraced her bold, revenue-producing approach—along with the quality of her *Superman*-inspired drawings—but worried about sustainability and how such a large intervention would hold up over time.



Drawings by Hongjia Zhou MA 20 were inspired by the original *Superman* comic.
Courtesy Rhode Island School of Design.



At the intersection of architecture, conservation and design, Interior Architecture at RISD takes an innovative approach to the study of reuse and transformation of existing buildings. Advanced design studios focused on adaptive reuse are central to both the undergraduate and graduate programs. And unlike the fields of interior design and decoration, Interior Architecture looks less at the application of surface materials than at understanding the design of buildings from inside out.

About Rhode Island School of Design

RISD's mission, through its college and museum, is to educate students and the public in the creation and appreciation of works of art and design, to discover and transmit knowledge and to make lasting contributions to a global society through critical thinking, scholarship and innovation. The college's strategic plan NEXT: RISD 2020-2027 sets an ambitious vision for educating students for the future and bringing creative practices to bear on the creation of just societies, a sustainable planet and new ways of making and knowing. RISD's immersive model of art and design education, which emphasizes critical making through studio-based learning and robust study in the liberal arts, prepares students to intervene in the critical challenges of our time. Working with exceptional faculty and in extraordinary specialized facilities, 2,500 students from 69 countries engage in 42 full-time bachelor's and master's degree programs. RISD's 30,000 alumni worldwide testify to the impact of this model of education, exemplifying the vital role artists and designers play in today's society. Founded in 1877, RISD (pronounced "RIZ-dee") and the RISD Museum help make Providence, RI among the most culturally active and creative cities in the region. Find more information at risd.edu.

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