

The Boston Globe

Style & Arts

THURSDAY, AUGUST 10, 2006

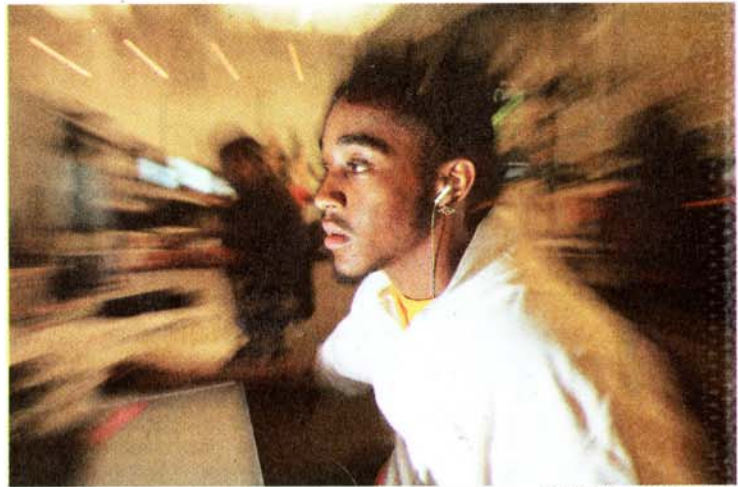
DESIGNED WITH LEARNING IN MIND

City youths, area companies
benefit in creative program

By Don Aucoin
GLOBE STAFF

WEST NEWTON — It's a scenario as old as business itself: A middle-aged mentor and a youthful mentee are teamed up on an important project, and one is hanging on the other's every word and nodding enthusiastically as suggestions and insights flow across a conference table.

But not in the usual direction. The nodder is 39-year-old Dean Whitney, a principal designer in the brand group at Continuum, an international design consultancy. The one doing most of the talking is 18-year-old Carlos Cardoso of Dorchester, an intern barely a month out of high school. Their task on this



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Carlos Cardoso of Dorchester is learning from design pros as they learn from him. "Whatever they say, I'll follow, I'll listen," he says.

weekday afternoon: to design a deluxe container for future mailings of American Express Platinum cards.

"What were you thinking when you looked through this?" Whitney asks, gesturing toward a book of wall coverings splayed before Cardoso. The teenager gives a reply that reveals both his eye and his age: "I was looking for a texture that is not seen anywhere, that would make me want to play with it."

Whitney laughs ruefully. "I can honestly say I would never have picked up this book for this," he admits. "I would never have picked up wall coverings." Cardoso is not finished. With an array of texture samples fanned out before him like playing cards, he pronounces one texture entirely unsuitable — likening it to his cousin's prom gown, which, he says, just didn't work in a certain light. But then he slides another texture sample across the table, noting approvingly that it "reminds me of Greece or Rome. It would be on a stone or something."

Whitney looks impressed, even a bit dazed. "He opened up a whole side of my brain here," he says. "He's going to inspire me to look at something different next time."

It's a kind of impact few interns dare to dream about, a two-way traffic in ideas few expect to experience. But it's all in a day's work for Cardoso, a recent graduate of Boston Arts Academy who is headed this fall to Boston Architectural College. He is one of several Boston youths working at area design firms as part of Youth Design Boston, a program whose aim is to introduce artistic city kids to creative career choices.

It has also proven to be an unexpected education for the professionals. Since designers operate in a world that caters in large part to the appetites and aesthetics of the young, they are seizing the chance to pick the interns' brains, learn from their innovations, and check out what they're wearing, what they're buying, what they like.

"He's not coming with all the baggage I have about 'You can't use a wall-cover for a direct-mail piece,'" says Whitney. And then there is Cardoso's own innate sense of style. "Everybody here is staring at him every day," confides Whitney as Cardoso walks back to his desk. "He's the coolest right now. . . . We're looking for inspiration, too."

From toes to cornrows, Cardoso exudes the sensibility of a visual artist. He wears a pair of Air Jor-

dan Retro 7 sneakers, and wrap-around sunglasses are perched high on his forehead. An ornate mix of imagery and script is tattooed across his right arm. A diamond stud gleams from his left earlobe, just below the wireless earpiece that is part of his Bluetooth-enabled Blackberry 7100. Even Cardoso's more mundane garb — the black Dockers' slacks, the untucked red polo shirt he bought at T.J. Maxx — seems to bear a customized touch. When he leaves the building, he will don a Red Sox hat he bought from Lids, but it is white, not the customary blue.

"A lot of people in here ask me questions," he acknowledges. "They want to know a little more about my personality, how it all connects somehow." But he is quick to point out that he has a lot to learn from the pros at Continuum about how to design "products that will actually be out there." "Whatever they say, I'll follow, I'll listen," he says.

Even his desk — a space that is utilitarian for most — is a fashion statement of sorts. In contrast to the standard lettering other employees at Continuum have on their nameplates, Cardoso has airbrushed "Carlos's Desk" in the style of a graffiti tag. He found a

way to employ similar lettering on his office Intranet home page. In addition to the American Express project, Cardoso is doing computerized sketches to help design a new kind of mailbox for a client.

"We could have a high school student in here who's overwhelmed by this, but what he told me is: 'Bring it on,'" says Whitney. "He's got bandwidth to spare."

A less vivid, but still visible, profile has been established by 17-year-old Alec Mauré of Jamaica Plain, an intern at Proteus, a product development and marketing firm in Cambridge's Kendall Square.

One of Mauré's first assignments was to help with a PowerPoint presentation of several concept renderings of different faucet designs. Instructed where to place the images on a page by Proteus lead designer Roy Thompson, Mauré noticed that the layout looked crowded and suggested they change it. "Here's the intern, with zero experience, telling me how to do it," Thompson recalls, chuckling. "But if he has a point, he has a point. And he had a point." In fact, according to Thompson, Mauré's "initiative and keen eye saved several hours of work."

On a recent weekday, the pony-



JODI HILTON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Carlos Cardoso (right), an intern, does most of the talking about his ideas for a project when he meets with Dean Whitney, principal designer at Continuum, a design consultancy.

tailed Mauré sits quietly during a raucous noontime meeting of product designers, graphic designers, mechanical engineers, and marketing specialists. During the meeting, which is punctuated by frequent laughter, they brainstorm themes for the half-dozen conference rooms in Proteus's sprawling new headquarters. (The theory is that the themes will give birth to names.)

They cover some basic ideas — cars, boats, birds, literary figures, physics terms, famous designers, products like cod that evoke Boston. Then the creativity starts to flow. “Characters from ‘The Simpsons,’” suggests one employee. “Dead celebrities,” suggests another. “Derogatory IT terms,” says a third. Since Proteus's motto is “Mastering Change,” one employee suggests the word “change” in different languages. When another suggests music technologies, from the Victrola to MP3 players, Mauré somewhat diffidently offers: “Types of music?” At one point, Thompson asks: “How about the names of past interns?” Mauré smiles at that one.

All in all, it's not a bad way to spend your lunch hour. “This meeting just now, that was a lot of fun,” Mauré says later. “I didn't expect it to be that kind of, I won't say crazy, but . . . energetic.”

Energy — and synergy — was the point behind Youth Design Boston from the beginning. Founded three years ago by Denise Korn, owner of Korn Design, it is run by the Boston chapter of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, in collaboration with the Boston Private Industry Council.

Korn says she envisioned it as a career-development program that would create a “cross-pollination between the vibrancy of the design community here in Boston” and students with a talent for design, drawing, film, painting, or other forms of art. “We set up the program so it's not just a walk in the park, but it does require a real focus and commitment,” she says.

At present, interns are drawn from three Boston schools: Boston Latin School, Boston Arts Academy, and Madison Park High School. This year, in addition to Cardoso and Mauré, the interns include 19-year-old Ifeoma Onuorah of Dorchester, who is working on graphic design at Red Hat Inc., a software firm in Westford, and 17-year-old Michael Chew of West Roxbury, who is working on a logo development project at Proteus.

A key role in selecting the interns is played by the Boston Private Industry Council, a business-led organization that finds private-sector employment for Boston stu-

dents as part of the mayor's summer jobs program. A PIC career specialist in the schools identifies students who are interested in design, and the students submit samples of their work and are interviewed by a committee that includes Korn and a couple of AIGA members. “We don't have a lot of slots, but it's a really amazing opportunity for the right kid,” says Korn.

Josh Bruno, the summer jobs coordinator for the Boston Private Industry Council, says the goal is to enlist more design firms and open up more internships. “We have a ton of kids that are interested in design,” says Bruno. “And these small firms can really mentor these kids; they can show them different skills they need. The kids are really grabbing the opportunity.”

To Mauré, there are several rungs on that ladder of opportunity, each of which he seems determined to grasp. He ticks them off before heading off to update the design of a poster for one of Proteus's clients.

“It's really about learning the environment and learning the trade, almost,” he says. “Learning to think differently.”

Don Aucoin can be reached at aucoin@globe.com.