Stadium design exercise shows kids how city works

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The Monday after Mayor Daley presented the U.S. Olympic Committee with preliminary plans to bring the 2016 Summer Games to Chicago, a group of high school kids were working out their own designs for a lakefront stadium.

In the process, they learned how the City that Works actually works.

The 24 students at a Northwestern University summer institute came up with ideas like a floating stadium on Lake Michigan, a crescent-shaped arena with clear canopies and unobstructed lake views, and amenities like facial recognition cameras for security.

A few teams opted for touchscreen computers at every seat. The screens would be designed to serve up custom-made instant replays, language translation, e-mail and could be used to order beer and hot dogs.

“We basically thought of all the inconveniences and then fixed them,” said Don Jung, 17, who’ll be a senior at Niles North High School in Skokie come fall. “We thought it’d be pretty sweet if you went to the Games and never had to get up from your seats — except for bathroom breaks, maybe.”

‘It affects all our lives’

NU’s Infrastructure Technology Institute hosted the Chicago area kids during a weeklong, all-expense-paid immersion camp designed to get them thinking about infrastructure: roads, public utilities, airports and waste management services.

The partial roof on this design echoes the five Olympic rings.

“Going into it, I had virtually no idea what infrastructure was,” said Mari Yamagawa, 15, who will be a junior at Northside College Prep this fall. “I realized it affects all our lives and saw how I would definitely benefit from it.”

Most kids might not clamber to spend prime summer goof-off time studying the gritty details of transportation or sewer systems.

But Dave Schulz, executive director of the institute, says the experience of taking civil engineering classes, going on field trips to places like the Illinois Railway Museum and Midway Airport, and the intense work of designing a temporary, reusable Olympic stadium will help these kids on whatever paths they choose.

“If someone comes out of it wanting to be a civil engineer — great,” said Schulz, “but we want kids to really look, for the first time, at what makes a city work and how it’s all connected.”

The student teams had to wrestle with details of material and shipping costs and innovative design, and keep in mind how the city’s residents could benefit from the venues after the Games were over.

‘So many things to plan’

“Part of the challenge was to think of it in terms of multipurpose tasking so modules could be taken apart,” said Delvina Christian, the institute’s on-site student coordinator. “Concession stands could be used for a soup kitchen, or press boxes could be given to schools as extra classroom space.”

Ultimately, the students came away with a better understanding of the unseen systems people take for granted until something goes wrong.

“When I went downtown to see the fireworks, I realized all the different and simultaneous systems in place — so many things to plan,” said Priyanka Prakash, 15, who’ll be a junior at the Illinois Math and Science Academy in the fall. “I saw the Taste of Chicago with new eyes.”

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