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Creators receive design award for Reiman Gardens structure



Photo: Judah Melton/Iowa State Daily
The Christina Reiman Butterfly Wing is shown on Monday at Reiman Gardens.

By **Alicia Ebaugh**
Daily Staff Writer

The nearly 100 species of butterflies at Reiman Gardens attract plenty of attention; now, the architectural firm that built the complex they are housed in is getting some notice too.

Architects Smith Metzger of Des Moines earned the 2004 Innovative Design and Excellence in Architecture Using Structural Steel award for its use of three-dimensional visual technology in the first stages of the design process for the Reiman Gardens Conservatory Complex. The award from the American Institute of Steel Construction was presented to the firm earlier this month in conjunction with the annual American Institute of Architects Convention in Chicago.

Both Daryl Metzger and Robert Smith, principal architects for Architects Smith Metzger, are graduates of Iowa State.

"We're very proud of the project, as well," said Dean Morton, university architect. "Primarily it's an award for the designers, but it's also an honor for the owners. It's been recognized as a quality product."

Morton, who helps manage all campuswide architectural projects, said visualizing how the complex would look was difficult at first. In the beginning of a building project, he said, Iowa State usually puts architectural contracts up for public bidding, and architects have to draw their ideas into

floor plans, two-dimensional representations of how they would build the project.

Since Morton didn't know how the conservatory complex should look, it was hard to only see two dimensions of it, he said.

"This was a higher-level design because it's like the front door of the college -- it had to look good as well as function," he said. "What Smith Metzger did, and they do it better than probably any firm we work with, is they were able to work with computer-generated models so their models are 100 percent visually accurate. It enabled us to approve the plans more wholly."

Metzger said the method of computerized modeling was helpful to Iowa State because the firm could come up with creative ideas and implement them into the design right away and look at the project from a multitude of angles.

"It allows us to look at the project from their perspective as well as ours -- it lets us see how we can make their ideas work all the way to how we can control sunlight coming in," he said. "We can walk through the project, fly around it, slice it, dice it ... it's a very helpful process that allows people at very different levels of sophistication to come together and understand what we're saying."

The firm has also won a craft award for the project from the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Metzger said. Although he helped design the butterfly house, Metzger said its structure has become secondary in importance to him -- he's enthralled with its inhabitants.

"I've been there many times for many, many different reasons, and I think the complex is just beautiful."