DONALDSVILLE — To the casual observer, the vacant gasoline service station on Railroad Avenue is an eyesore.

Elliott Perkins, the 1930s mission-style building would make a perfect Art Deco cafe, where tourists exploring this historic small city can enjoy latte and other trendy coffee concoctions.

Perkins, a fourth-year Tulane University architecture undergraduate from Santa Barbara, Calif., is one of the students of Eugene D. Cizek, director of Tulane’s Preservation Studies Program.

Cizik’s students devised landscaping and renovation proposals for 635 historically significant buildings in Donaldsonville’s 42-block historic district.

Cizik’s students also prepared measured drawings and restoration plans for the new owners of the once magnificent Belle Alliance plantation home, a distressed 33-room beauty facing Bayou Lafourche six miles south of town on La. 308.

“Children were the biggest and richest sugar cane plantations in Louisiana,” Cizik said of site of the 11,000-square-foot, circa 1800 Greek Revival mansion.

Immigrants from the Canary Islands known as Isleños settled the Belle Alliance site, which they called Valenzuela, in the late 1770s during Spanish colonial rule.

Charles Anton Kock, a German immigrant, purchased the site in 1846.

“This house was famous for its parties and gardens,” Cizik said.

The work of Cizik’s students is on display at the Historic Donaldsonville Museum, housed inside the circa 1836 B. Lemann & Brother Inc. department store.

That’s where school children from Ascension and St. Charles parishes performed at Ascension and St. Charles parishes performed re-enactments Friday and Saturday of the people who built or lived in the buildings.

The museum also displays the same drawings by Donaldsonville students of some of their favorite hometown historic structures.

Those activities were part of Education through Historic Preservation, a program begun 20 years ago by Cizik and Tulane physics and math teacher Lloyd L. Sensat Jr.

“That museum was the beginning of something good,” Donaldsonville Mayor Harold Capello said of the museum assembled by residents and opened in December 1997.

The project by the Tulane University students is another important step in the city’s redevelopment, Capello said.

“These kids see things in some of the buildings that I never saw,” the mayor said.

“They’re amazing.” Illustrating both the mundane and the magnificent, the students’ detailed drawings and photographs will preserve forever the historic structures, at least on paper and in a computer database.

Each of Cizik’s students took a three-block area, completed detailed, measured drawings of the structures, rated the buildings for historic importance, and then made renovation and landscape proposals.

Tulane student Elliott Perkins was assigned the area on Railroad Avenue, where the Texaco station caught his fancy.

“Service stations are really a part of our cultural landscape,” Perkins said.

“What I like about them is that there was a time when oil companies needed (service) stations to fit their image, and a lot of times these old stations went out of business because they didn’t fit that image,” Perkins said.

Next to the gasoline station is the old Kenwin Shop at 211 Railroad Ave.

This vacant circa 1925 building, which has five apartments on the upper floor, can be had for a mere $50,000, according to the for-sale sign on the building’s plate-glass window.

Perkins said the smart buyer should convert the building into a bookstore, taking advantage of the proposed cafe next door.

One of the imminent projects will come before the Donaldsonville Commission Council next month, when the commissioners will vote on a proposal to sell land it owns on Lessard Street for a black heritage center.

Katie Hambrick proposes expanding the River Road African-American Museum and Gallery, currently housed at Tezcuco Plantation in Burnside, to a spot near the True Friends Hall in Donaldsonville.

Freed slaves built the hall, at 711 Lessard St., in 1885 for the True Friends Mutual Benevolent Association.

During its heyday, the now vacant, deteriorating building hosted Zulu Carnival balls and musical events such as Fats Domino, the Brothers Johnson and hometown jazz legend Claiborne Williams.

Hambrick said she plans to move three donated historic buildings to the site.

They are:

- The two-story circa 1830 Africa Plantation house, located on a 450-acre plantation in La. 308 purchase by John H. Lowery, one of the first Black physicians in the country;
- The four-room Central Agricultural School for black students built in the 1930s on the Mississippi River East Bank in Westville and donated to the museum by the St. James Parish School Board; and
- The African Universal Church and Commercial League, an 800-square-foot circa 1940 cypress church complex with outhouse, located on the Mississippi River East Bank in Geismar.

“We want to work with the city and the state Office of Tourism to develop Donaldsonville as an African-American heritage site,” Hambrick said.