Designer hopes sidewalk canopies would top BR revival

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Advocate staff writer

It didn't take long for an eye-catching proposal — sidewalk canopies along Third Street — to surface during planning sessions to create new landscaping for downtown Baton Rouge.

During an early morning meeting of the Plan Baton Rouge steering committee, recent Yale University graduate Russell Davies unveiled his proposal to use a string of independent, overlapping canopies to line Third Street.

The free-standing steel canopies would carry a theme of magnolia trees and the Mississippi River.

Davies said the canopies would keep sun and rain off pedestrians and create a visual feature unique to downtown Baton Rouge. The canopies wouldn't be attached to the buildings, he said.

The design was a project Davies did to earn his master's degree from Yale. His professor, Alexander Garvin, was a consultant in the team that created a downtown revitalization plan for Baton Rouge.

Garvin said he challenged Davies to come up with a design with a "signature" to make it clear to visitors that they were walking on a street in Baton Rouge.

"It needs to be something different than everywhere else in the United States," Garvin said. "It has to be a wonderful place to be."

Davies was one of many architects working Friday in Baton Rouge to come up with a master plan for landscaping the downtown area. The Louisiana Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects is holding its annual meetings in Baton Rouge and

Downtown resident Darryl Gissel examines a model of a sidewalk canopy proposed Friday for Third Street during a meeting at the Old State Capitol of Louisiana landscape architects.
Landscape architect Ken Williams, left, and designer Christopher Platter talk with downtown resident Darryl Gissel, right, about trees during a meeting of Louisiana landscape architects Friday at the Old State Capitol. The architects are developing a landscape plan for downtown.

Canopies

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began planning sessions Friday afternoon.

Troy Bunch, chapter president and city-parish planning director, said the group is reviewing landscape plans for the downtown revitalization project.

Association members decided to take on the Baton Rouge project as a present to Louisiana’s capital city in connection with the Bonne Fête celebration. The celebration marks the 300th anniversary of French explorers arriving on land that is now Baton Rouge.

Detailed recommendations to enhance the landscape plan will be made after two more hours of planning this morning.

Architects did preliminary design proposals Friday afternoon, but will add specific landscaping elements today.

Architect Chad Danos said he hopes the project will serve as a prototype for other cities interested in improving landscaping.

Davies’ design also calls for Third Street, now a one-way street, to handle two-way traffic. The design calls for pedestrian crosswalks at each intersection and in the middle of each block.

Public Works Director Fred Raiford said he likes Davies’ design, but said there are structural and practical matters that still must be addressed.

The downtown revitalization plan aims to bring more pedestrians downtown, and two-way streets attract more cars, he noted. Steps would have to be taken to protect the pedestrians, he said.

Davies’ canopy plan would not change the fronts of the buildings. Existing awnings would work with the design because there would be a space between the edges of the new canopies and the store fronts, he said.

Steel canopy tops would create a flow, while support poles would have several decorative features, including steel magnolia leaves, Davies said.

Lighting placed below the leaves would cast a shadow of them on the underside of the canopies at night.